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*Peter Penniless: Gamekeeper
and Gentleman*

George Christopher Davies

Camden Road Collegiate School,
CAMBRIDGE HOUSE, WEST HOLLOWAY.
2^d PRIZE.

Examination *Midsummer 1888*

Awarded to

Leah

for

Languages

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PETER PENNILESS.



Front

PETER AND JERRY.

THE ANNALS OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE

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PETER PENNILESS:

Gamekeeper and Gentleman.

BY

G. CHRISTOPHER DAVIES,

AUTHOR OF "THE SWAN AND HER CREW," "WILDCAT TOWER,"
"THE NORFOLK BROADS," ETC.

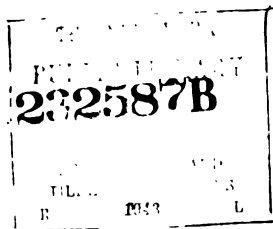
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WITH ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS.



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1894
72



PREFACE.

IF the adventures of Peter and Gerard find as much favour as those of the "*Crew of the Swan*," I shall be abundantly satisfied. If I were forced by circumstances to adopt some humble means of getting a living, I should be thankful to have so pleasant a life as that of an intelligent gamekeeper. I remember that when I was preparing "*The Swan and her Crew*," I wrote the MS. in shorthand, and while seeking for a copyist who could transcribe it into longhand for the printers, I had an application from a gamekeeper in the South of England. He was endeavouring to train himself for a better position by self-education, and had taken up shorthand as a useful thing to know. What became of him I do not know, but I hope his efforts were rewarded. Peter's preliminary advantages were much greater than his, and I hardly expect that he was so successful or so fortunate as Peter.

"Whatever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might," is the principle running through Peter's story; and if the books I have written for boys have been of any real value, it is because I have always insisted on the thorough application of that principle.

The pressure of professional avocations had caused me to abandon the idea of writing any more books for boys; but so many boys, like Oliver, asked for more, that I broke my resolve. Hence "Peter Penniless."

I hope that my boy readers (and those sedentary critics whose minds have not the health induced by exercise of body) will not for a moment suppose that Peter liked the slaughter and destruction of wild creatures which is narrated. It was his duty, however, and he did it without any mawkish sentiment. Nowadays people are so super-sensitive, that they dread to punish a brutal murderer; turn up the yellow of their eyes at sport of any kind; and deem physical courage an ignoble attribute. Out upon them—they should wear petticoats. Boys, grow up to be manly; be slow to take offence, but strong to protect your home and your country. In order that you may have such strength, take your fill, while you are young, of those country pastimes and exercises which made our forefathers Englishmen indeed.



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CHAPTER I.

Introductory—The homeless boys, Peter and Gerard.

ON a hill overlooking one of the broad reaches of the Severn stands a large house, evidently a mansion of ancient date and considerable importance. Apparently it is not at present inhabited. The chill winds of an October evening sweep over a neglected and desolate garden, scattering leaves which there is no gardener to brush from the garden walk. The grass on the lawn has grown long, and the flower-beds look ragged and forlorn. Shutters close all the windows, and straw and paper and litter of various kinds strewed about indicate that a removal of all the furniture has lately taken place. And if you could gain access to the interior you would see that every room was empty and bare; every room, that is, save one, and this is so strange in its exception that it would excite your surprise.

It is a small room at the back of the house, and a bright fire is burning in the grate, illuminating the apartment with its fitful glare, the candles on the little deal table being still unlit. Besides the table, the only other articles of furniture are two kitchen chairs. But the room is as full as it can be of miscellaneous things appertaining to the sports and pastimes of boys. A bicycle, one of the wooden "boneshakers" which were then just giving way to the swifter and more graceful machines of the present day, was propped up against the wall. A handsome breech-loader and several fishing-rods, with baskets and tackle;

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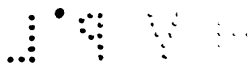
whips, skates, single-sticks, cricket-bats, climbing-irons, flannel suits and boating-shoes, boxing-gloves, a saddle, a pair of prize sculls, and other articles too numerous to mention ; and a large number of books were laid out on the floor with some attempt at order. The collection comprised all the things which well-favoured boys, the sons of wealthy and affectionate parents, would be likely to amass. On the table lay two valuable gold watches and two plain silver ones, and by them lay a sheet of paper, on which an inventory of all the things had been written out.

Now for the human occupants of the room. These were two boys, of the ages of eighteen and seventeen. The elder was very tall and big-boned—a broad-shouldered young giant with a very boyish face, but the figure of a man. He stood with his back to the fire in the orthodox British fashion, with his back leaning against the mantelpiece, and his hands clasped above his curly head. In front of him sat the younger, astride a chair, with his face bowed in his hands. He, too, was a well-made lad as compared with other lads, but was an infant as compared with his big brother. He was dark, while the elder was fair and white. The face of the elder was ruddy and cheerful ; the face of the younger was paler and more thoughtful.

“Well, Jerry,” said the elder, “here we and all our worldly possessions are. What shall we do with them, and how shall we live ?”

“I don’t know, Peter,” replied Jerry. “I wonder if any other two boys had to shift for themselves so suddenly as we have had to do !”

Now, as this story is, I hope, going to be a happy and a healthy one, I will not burden my readers with much of a very sorrowful occurrence, or series of occurrences rather, which had led to two boys of good family, brought up to suppose that they were well off and had no need to trouble themselves as to the future, which for them had worn its rosiest and brightest colours, to such a position as that indicated by their conversation. It is necessary,



however, for me to briefly allude to these sad circumstances in order to explain the reason of my story, and why I think it worth telling.

Mr. Longley, the father of the two boys, had been a country gentleman of good estate, living in Devonshire. A fondness for speculation grew upon him to a greater extent than he had brains to manage, and it became necessary to sell his estates and adopt a simpler mode of life. But just at this time his wife died, and he, leaving his native county, where the associations were too painful for him, hired a comfortable mansion on the banks of the Severn, where he and his two boys, Peter and Gerard, lived for some years. Mr. Longley never forgot his wife or his former estate, and never ceased to grieve for both, and he grew a morose and solitary man, making no friends in his new neighbourhood, and carefully avoiding old ones. He was always kind to his boys, and when the holidays brought them home from Eton he forced on himself a semblance of cheerfulness, the reaction from which added to his depression afterwards. He lived very quietly, his household being managed by his old keeper, who had accompanied him from Devonshire, nominally to take charge of about eight hundred acres of shooting which went with the house, but really because of the attachment which existed between master and man.

Peter and Gerard (familiarly called Jerry) enjoyed themselves immensely at Eton after somewhat different lines. Peter was foremost in all athletic games, but was by choice a "wet bob," that is, he paid most attention to rowing.

In all sports, however, he was enthusiastic, and his size and strength ensured him pre-eminence. As for lessons, he never thought of them if he could help it, and perhaps no boy in the school profited less by what the masters were supposed to teach him. He was not naturally a dunce by any means; but he simply ignored study as practically useless, and devoted all his energies to what he considered the only things worth doing. So that,

between his school sports and his home opportunities, he was at the age of eighteen a proficient in all outdoor pursuits, a good shot, a good fisherman, and familiar with the ways of beasts, birds, and fishes. But the impressions he received from his masters were not upon his mind, but upon that part of him which the fire was comfortably warming. He could write, certainly; but he had some difficulty in reading his own writing. Of course he could read well enough, and he was pretty familiar with crib Latin and Greek, as he had a good memory. He could add two and two, and multiply the same; but nine times nine was a puzzle to him.

Gerard, on the other hand, while eager enough in pursuit of his natural history and scientific hobbies, had a much more studious cast of mind, and good ability withal. He took kindly to legitimate school work, and rose rapidly in the school and in the estimation of the masters under whom he successively passed. He was, in fact, a promising youth, and had dreams of a brilliant career at college and afterwards. These dreams and Peter's self-indulgence were ruthlessly cut short. Mr. Longley was found dead in his study one day, and in his hand was a telegram announcing the failure of an unlimited company, in which much of his remaining capital was invested, and which had been paying a high rate of interest. Now, the meaning of a company being unlimited is that its shareholders are liable to their last penny to the payment of the debts of the company. Every shilling that Mr. Longley possessed was swept away, and his two boys were left penniless, and almost friendless, to face the world. When I say penniless, their private possessions were, of course, not touched, and these they had gathered together and proposed to turn them into money for their immediate necessities.

Now we can take up the interrupted conversation.

"We must sell these things, Jerry, or most of them. These watches should fetch something; but, as they were father's present, it is dreadful to have to part with them."

"Yes, and everything is a present from him. But when Wilson comes, we had better ask him to take charge of them, and do the best he can for us. Of course we will keep the silver watches, and I will keep my books, because you can't get much for books, I know," answered Jerry. Wilson was the keeper, who, with his wife, had removed to the Lodge before the sale, which had taken place a day or two previously.

"Old Wilson knows of a berth for himself, doesn't he? so that he will be all right."

"Yes, Jerry; he told me he has got an offer from that London man who has bought the estate over the river. But he will have a lot more to do there than he had here, and he is growing old. Father had left him a good legacy; but then, you see, there is nothing to leave. Well, it is no use being down in the mouth. We'll find something to do, you may be sure. You can be a clerk or a schoolmaster, and I can be a——"

Peter paused. He knew he could not be a clerk or a schoolmaster. He was fit for nothing where any education was required. His physical strength was his only possession. All this occurred to him quickly enough, and it was with a great effort that he kept the "stiff upper lip," which his English courage and his pride of race made it incumbent upon him to keep.

"Light the candles, Jerry: it will be more cheerful. I can be a coalheaver, or a labourer, or a soldier. I see they have sent the *Field* as usual. We must countermand it to-morrow. Let us look down the advertisement columns, and see what sort of places there are to be had."

The two boys opened the *Field*, and scanned its columns, more for the sake of passing the time and having something to talk about than with any idea of finding anything suitable for Peter. The latter kept up a running commentary on the advertisements to amuse his brother and drive away the trouble which lay heavy on both of them.

"Tutor! That won't do for me, or amanuensis. Farm bailiff!

That's what I should like ; but how am I to learn farming? Coachman! I could be a coachman."

"Peter, don't talk nonsense. How could you do anything menial?" cried Gerard.

"I don't mind what I do ; there's no disgrace in being a servant. I shouldn't do as a butler or a footman, but I'll be shot if I should mind being a coachman, only nobody would take me. Gardener! I hardly know a rose from a dahlia. Gamekeeper! That's it, Jerry. Hurrah! I could be a gamekeeper ; and I should make a good one, that I know. I will be a gamekeeper."

"Peter, Peter, don't be so foolish. You can't be a gamekeeper all your life. Just think what hard rough work it is, and what sort of people you would have to pass your life amongst. You would have to touch your hat to the swells, and shake hands with the cottage folk. But you are only pretending."

"Look here, Jerry," said Peter, earnestly. "I do, upon my honour, think it would be a good thing for me, if I got an under-keeper's place—I could do it so well. I should get my own living, and look out for other chances. I should learn farming, for keepers are always about the farms, and I know I could pick up all there is to learn ; and then I might get a place as farm-bailiff, or know enough to manage a farm, if I had to emigrate. I tell you it's a splendid idea. You know I am fit for nothing else, and I am fit for that. I shan't be a keeper all my life, but if I am I shan't be unhappy. What do I care for hard work, or rough work? am I not strong enough? What harm will it do me to be civil to my superiors, and how will it demean me to be friendly with the country folk? They are, take 'em all round, as honest as their betters, and a good deal more kindly. No, Jerry, my boy, I——"

There is no knowing how long Peter in his enthusiasm would have gone on, had he not been interrupted by a loud knocking at one of the outer doors, which resounded through the empty house.

"There's Wilson, come to carry us off to the Lodge for supper,"

said Gerard. "He will soon knock all those fine ideas out of your head."

"Will he? We will see when he comes," replied Peter, striding off to let Wilson in.



CHAPTER II.

Peter decides on being a gamekeeper, and obtains a berth.

WHEN Peter reappeared with Wilson, Gerard burst out with,

"It won't do at all, Peter. How will you like receiving tips from the swells you will have to attend when they are shooting?"

"I don't think I ever objected to a tip," replied Peter, laughing; "and I don't see why I should begin now. It will be payment for work done, and so will be more honourable than getting tips for nothing, as we have always had before. Do be sensible, Jerry. If I am to emigrate, what better training can I have than roughing it for a few years in the woods and fields, and learning something of farming by the way?"

Wilson, the white-haired old gamekeeper, here interposed, and said,

"May I ask, young gentlemen, what you are talking about?"

Peter unfolded his plan to him, and the old man paused for a while before replying, and then he said,

"That's just like your pluck, Mr. Peter, to think of such a thing, and I don't know what you can do better. I was thinking to myself as I came up the avenue, what will Mr. Peter do? He ain't a scholar, that I know, although he ought to be. Now, Mr. Gerard, there, his learning will keep him afloat, but Mr. Peter, his learning ain't in his head, but in his body, and what-

ever can a gentleman do with his body to get a living? That's what I was thinking, and no life can be better than a gamekeeper's; out of doors day and night, fresh air, and always some sport going on, and something to circumvent, vermin or poachers, so that your wits are always on the work. Then you know, sir, a gamekeeper is a man of note in the village if he keeps himself up properly. He must keep out of the public, and not make too great friends with anybody, although he must be civil to all. The evildoers are afraid of him, and the farmers respect him. Ay, ay, if he holds up his head and does nothing to be ashamed of, the gamekeeper's a notable man in his neighbourhood. I think, Mr. Peter, you will find it better to be a gamekeeper than to do nothing. But there is no hurry about it. If you will excuse me saying so, sir, while I have a roof over my head, there is a home for you as long as you haven't one of your own."

"Thank you, Wilson," said Peter, blowing his nose violently, "but the sooner I get to work the happier I shall be. Let us have another look at those advertisements."

"Wait a bit, sir. If you have made up your mind, I may be able to help you. My wife's brother is a keeper in the eastern counties, at a place called Wetacre, close by the sea. He wrote to the missis the other day, and said that his under-keeper had left him to go to a head keeper's place, and he wanted another badly, as he is not so young as he once was. The estate he is on belongs, I believe, either to a spinster lady or a widow lady, and she leaves everything to him. They don't keep a great head of game, but there is a wild-fowl decoy there, which they set particular store by."

"Get your atlas, Jerry, and we will look it out on the map."

Jerry did so, and they ran their fingers down the coast-line of Norfolk and Suffolk.

"Here is the name, and here is a skriggling thing like an eel, which, I suppose, is a river, but there is no name to the river. The map is too small to tell us much."

"Why, here is Crostwich close by," exclaimed Gerard. "That is where old Xenophon went to. Don't you remember that Mr. Blackwood, whom we used to call Xenophon at Eton, went to take a school at Crostwich? I was under him for a year, and I think I was rather a favourite with him. I remember his telling me, when I met him and he stopped to say good bye, that he hoped his scholars at Crostwich would be as little trouble to him as I had been."

"Then write and ask him if he can find you a job as usher or junior master in his school," replied Peter, "and Wilson shall apply to his brother-in-law on my behalf."

"You are getting quite clever, Peter," replied Gerard. "If you are in earnest about the keeping, I should like to be somewhere near you."

"So should I, old man. Now to decide what Wilson shall say to his brother-in-law. What's his name, by the way?"

"Quadling, sir."

"Well, Mr. Quadling must not know who I am, and what my parentage is. I mean to pose as a small farmer's son, pretty well brought up; parents dead" (Peter paused a little, and then bravely resumed)—"too poor to take to farming, but fond of keeping; and I must also pretend to be older than I am. My master must have no suspicion that I ever had any higher pretensions, and I must make him suppose that my employment is fitted for me and I for it. And another thing, Jerry, I mean to change my name so as to destroy any clue which that might give."

"What name will you take, then?"

"Oh, anything. What will go well with Peter? Piper?—Peter Piper picked a pheasant—No, no, that's too suggestive Penniless?—that will do. Henceforward I am Peter Penniless, and nobody else."

Gerard gave up expostulating, for he did not believe that Peter was more than half in earnest; but Peter and Wilson were very much in earnest, and between them they soon settled on the kind

of letter the latter was to write to Mr. Quadling, and at their solicitation Gerard wrote to Mr. Blackwood, briefly stating the circumstances in which he was placed, and that it would be a matter of convenience (he would not put it any stronger) to him if he could find a place as usher or assistant in a school, and he took care to remind Mr. Blackwood of his proficiency in mathematics, in which the master was no proficient himself.

The letters written, and a certain line suggested for their future, both the boys felt much happier, and putting out the light and fire, they accompanied Wilson to his cottage, where Mrs. Wilson had provided them a plentiful supper, and where they were to sleep and stay for a few days at least. After supper, Peter said,

"Do either of you, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, know anything of any relations of either our father or mother? It seems so strange that we should have no relations of any kind. I surely remember an Uncle Gerard who used to give me presents when I was very little. Is he dead?"

"Well, Master Peter, your poor mother had no relations living as I know of. I've heard as she was the only daughter of an Indian officer, who died of cholera while she was at school in England; and your father?—well, he was the eldest of three brothers. The youngest was thrown whilst hunting, and killed; and the second was your Uncle Gerard. He went out to India in what they call the Civil Service, and when you remember him you was but a little thing, and he had come home for a holiday."

"And what has become of him since, and why would father never speak of him? I asked him once if Uncle Gerard was dead, and he said, 'Dead to us, my boy.'"

"Ay, they had a bitter quarrel. I never knew the rights of it, but I think it was about money matters. Mr. Gerard said something that Mr. Peter (your father) didn't like about his speculations, and they quarrelled, and Mr. Gerard went back to India, and I have never heard of him since. Why, that must be nine or ten years ago."

"Thank you," said Peter. "If he had quarrelled with my father, I shan't take any trouble to find him out."

The boys waited impatiently for replies to their two letters and Peter looked so often at the atlas that he learned more of the geography of East Anglia than he had ever learned at Eton. All their treasures were removed from the hall and stored in the lodge, for Peter would sell nothing until he knew what his immediate employment would be. At last and by the same post two letters came, one addressed to Wilson, and the other to Gerard. Wilson's was opened first, and Gerard waited to hear it read before opening his own. It ran :

DEAR JOHN,—I am glad, and so is my missis, to hear that you have got a good place, and hope you will be as comfortable there as you was in your last one. If you are getting like me, you will soon want to sit at your fireside oftener than going out. This decoying work is terrible bad for one's limbs. I don't like the look of it for this winter, and I can't trust any of the helpers to do what I want. Besides, they go and blab all my secrets, and tell others how I work the decoy, which I don't, for there is no decoy so well worked anywhere, though I say it, and I like to do it all myself. I hope you and your missis are well, and my old woman sends her best respects, and so do I.

"Yours truly, BENJAMIN QUADLING."

"What, nothing about the under-keeper?" cried Peter, greatly disappointed.

"Yes ; here's a postscript on the back."

"P.S.—I doubt what you say about young Penniless is too good to be true, but, if he likes to come and try, and will hold his tongue about what he sees at the decoy, he may come, and the sooner the better. He must come to the station at Crostwich and walk to Wetacre—9 miles. His box can come from there by the carrier, and he can sleep here for a night or two.—B. Q."

"Bravo, that's capital! That's a load off my mind, Jerry. Now, what's in your letter?"

Gerard read:—

"DEAR LONGLEY,—I am deeply grieved to hear of your sad loss, both of friends and of fortune. Come and stay with me for a time, and it is very probable indeed that I may secure your services to help me in teaching arithmetic. My school is a small one, and I have only one resident master. We set a sum the other day to which there could be no solution at all, and we both of us looked very foolish. Come at your convenience, and, with the kindest regards to you and your brother,

"I am, your sincere friend,

"SEPTIMUS BLACKWOOD."

"Of course I shall go," said Gerard, when he had finished reading his letter, "and it will be splendid to be near you, and I shall come and see you as often as I can."

"It is most providential," replied Peter; "but, I say, how about the names? You can't be Longley and I Penniless, if we are brothers."

"Whew—w!" whistled Gerard.

"Be half-brothers," suggested Wilson.

"Capital! That's the best way out of it."

It now became necessary to realize some of their possessions. The first difficulty was Peter's gun. It was necessary that he should have a gun, but this was far too good and expensive-looking, and its possession by an under-keeper would only provoke comment. So it had to be exchanged for a plainer weapon, and Wilson succeeded in getting a very serviceable central-fire double-barrel, and a fair amount of cash, as exchange. The next thing they took up was a double field-glass, also of the very best. Now, this was Mr. Longley's last gift to his son, and Peter refused to part with it, although a plain keeper's

glass would be more suitable for his necessities. It was finally decided that he should take it with him, and explain its possession by saying that a gentlemen who took an interest in him had given it to him. All his other things were sold, and out of the proceeds he purchased a strong silver watch, with a large white dial, so that the time might be more easily seen at night. Gerard retained his books and clothes, and also his bicycle, having in view the nine miles between Crostwich and Wetacre.

Peter's dress was the subject of much anxious consideration. He had his outer garments made by a village tailor, in order that no excellence of fit or style should raise suspicion; and he had his linen and under-garments made of the coarser and stouter materials which are usual amongst working men. When he was finally equipped he looked a splendid specimen of a country athlete, and every inch a budding gamekeeper. Wilson was loud in his praises, and said nobody would take him for a gentleman, except for his hands, which would soon get more manly-looking. Be it noted that, in Wilson's opinion, a "gentleman" was not so useful or so enviable a creature as a gamekeeper.

"Now, there's one bit of advice I'll give you," he said, "and that is this, *'always do what you are told without arguing, and don't set up to know better than your master.'*"

"All right, Mr. Wilson," replied Peter, touching his hat, to the keeper's delight. "I'll write that maxim on the fly-leaf of my Bible."

"Now, you don't know so much about trapping vermin as you ought for an under-keeper. You just sit down and listen to me, and I'll tell you all the secrets of trapping vermin, and I know some as few other keepers do know."

"Thank you; and if Gerard will sit at the table and note them down, it will be easier for me to remember."

And for four long hours the keeper discoursed his forest lore,

and Peter listened and drew diagrams, and Gerard wrote in his neat legible hand the heads of the advice given.

The next day they were off to Crostwich with the God-speed of old Wilson and his wife, and their hearts, which were heavy as they started, grew lighter as they neared their journey's end.



CHAPTER III

The departure—Crosthich—The head keeper, Quadling—The vermin-rails
—Price of vermin—The keeper's cottage.

IT is a long and weary journey across England from west to east, or east to west, and it was nine o'clock at night when the two boys reached Crosthich. They would not part that night, and got lodgings at a small inn, which promised to be, and was, clean and tidy. The next morning, too, it was hard to part, and they walked along the beach, and lay down in a sunny hollow on the cliff on which the town was built, and watched the ships sailing by in the bay, and the fisher-boats going and coming, and they talked and talked until midday. Then they ate their bread and cheese, and walked and talked again until it was past three o'clock, and then they wrung each other's hands and parted, Gerard going to the school to call on his old master, and Peter, shouldering his gun, inquired the way to Wetacre, and finding that the beach was as short a way as the road, stepped out at a good rate along the strip of hard sand which lies along the edge of the receding tide.

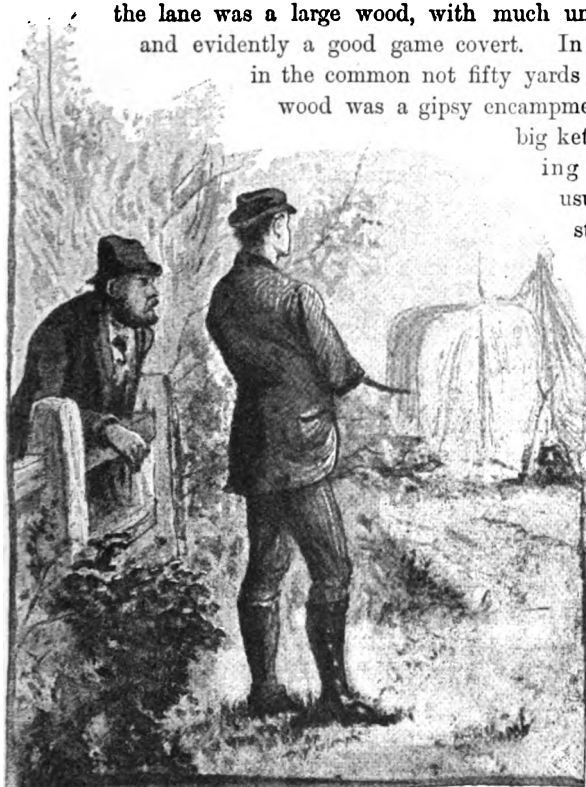
In about an hour and a half he came to a rabbit-warren, and not wishing to be seen with a gun walking through this, he branched off inland, until he struck a road, and this he followed until in the distance he saw a river and little harbour, and a cluster of red-roofed cottages, with a fine church standing far from the houses, as is usual in East Anglia.

"Is that Wetacre?" he asked of a boy who was swinging on

a gate; and on being answered in the affirmative, he inquired where Mr. Quadling lived.

"Take the first turn to the left, and go straight on for a mile or a mile and a half, and you will see a cottage with a powerful lot of thatch on it, and that's the keeper's."

The lane referred to led along one side of a large common, where there were geese and donkeys in plenty. On the left of the lane was a large wood, with much underwood, and evidently a good game covert. In a hollow in the common not fifty yards from the wood was a gipsy encampment, and a



big kettle hanging on the usual three sticks over a fire was uncommonly suggestive of the fate of some of the rabbits and pheasants in the adjacent wood.

PETER AND QUADLING.

Peter stopped and looked at the encampment, and said to himself, but aloud, not thinking any one was near,

"There's a pretty sight for a keeper to see. I'll be shot if I could stand that."

"You are right, young man," said a voice behind him; "it is a pretty sight, isn't it?"

Peter turned, and saw a short stout man in keeper's dress, carrying a gun under one arm and a bundle of vermin in the other.

"Mr. Quadling?" said Peter, touching his hat, and with a great throbbing of his heart from nervousness at his approaching plunge into keeperdom.

"Yes. Be you Peter Penniless?"

"Yes. Let me carry the vermin."

"Thank ye. Ha! hum!" quoth Mr. Quadling, looking Peter up and down. "You are a likely-looking lad enough. What's your height?"

"Six feet two in my stockings."

"And your weight?"

"Nearly twelve stone."

"And how much do you eat to keep up that size?"

"Not more than other people," answered Peter, laughing.

"Why, you could put me under your arm," rejoined the keeper.

"That depends which way round," said Peter, looking slyly at his companion's capacious vest.

"Ah, you rascal! You are laughing at me, are you? People do get stout at my age. I shouldn't mind if it wasn't for the night work at the decoy. You will have to do that now. I suppose you have walked from the station, and I allow you'll be hungry; but we shall be just in time for tea."

They came to a gate, which the keeper opened, and passing through a thick shrubbery of rhododendrons, they came in sight of the cottage, and Peter saw the glint of a lake beyond it. Close



VERMIN RAILS.

by them were a couple of tall dead tree-trunks, which the keeper said had both been blasted by the same flash of lightning. A number of rails were nailed across from one to the other, after the fashion of a five-barred gate, and to these rails were nailed the bodies of the stoats, weasels, hawks, crows, jays, and magpies

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which, because they were "vermin" destructive to game, had to be killed. They were there in all stages of decay and "mummyism," but Peter did not observe any cats' tails among them. He mentioned this to the keeper, and the latter laughed and said,

"No, no: the old dames of the village may suspect what becomes of their cats when they come poaching; but I never let out what I kill, and I give the bodies to my ferrets, and don't make the tails public."

By this time Peter had doffed his jacket, and with a hammer and nails, which he had seen in a hollow of one of the trees, he commenced to nail up two weasels, a stoat, a sparrow-hawk, and a crow, which were the keeper's spoil that day. It was a dirty job, but Peter was anxious to plunge into his work at once, and get the first unpleasantness over. Quadling was evidently pleased at his readiness to make himself useful, and asked him if he knew much about trapping.

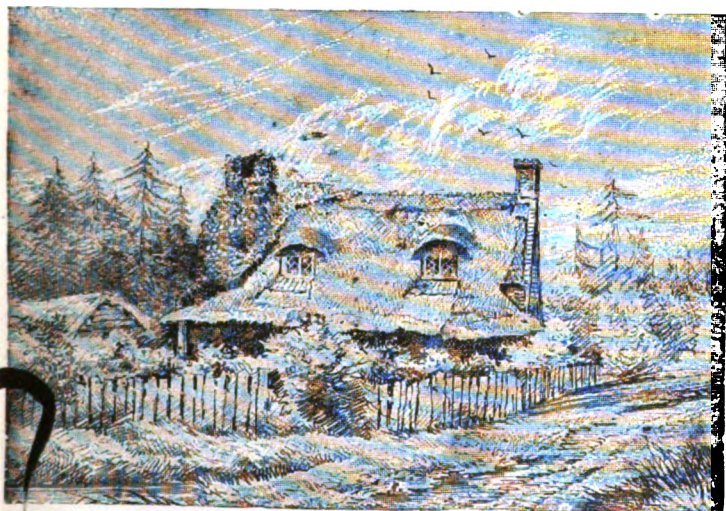
"Not so much as I expect to learn here," replied Peter, by which it will be seen that necessity was sharpening Peter's wits.

"Well, well, I daresay I can teach you something. Old men must know more than young ones. I am paid a price for all the vermin I kill. The mistress pays me sixpence for each stoat, weasel, crow, or hawk; threepence each for jays, magpies, and cats, and a penny for a rat. I'll share that with you if you like."

The keeper's cottage was a very picturesque one. The low walls supported a tremendous thatched roof rising high up, with dormer windows projecting out of it here and there, and the eaves came out some six feet beyond the wall, being supported by posts, and covering a paved verandah along the front of the cottage. Over one gable and up the chimney-stack was an immense cluster of ivy, which bore a ludicrous resemblance to a great bear clinging to the cottage. In the front garden there was a profusion of rose-bushes and of old-fashioned flowers, such as stocks,

wallflowers, pinks, and sunflowers. At the back of the cottage were the kennels and some outhouses, with poultry, ferrets, and a tame fox.

"Here, missis; here is young Penniless. Get a good tea ready for him, for he is a big 'un," cried the keeper to a bright keen-looking woman who was standing at the front door.



THE KEEPER'S COTTAGE.

Peter took off his hat in acknowledgment of the introduction, which was perhaps not quite in keeping with his assumed character, and Mrs. Quadling, who was a north-country woman by birth, and therefore given to plain speaking, replied,

"Hey, lad, you are welcome. You have the face of a boy, if you have the figure of a man."

And Peter blushed, and felt rather discomfited, for he could not tell whether her speech meant a compliment or not. They sat

down to a plentiful tea, during which the first feeling of strangeness wore off, and he felt more at his ease. He instinctively felt that the keeper and his wife were kindly disposed towards him, and in his gratitude, he said to himself that the spirit of true gentlemanliness, which is, after all, synonymous with true manhood, was present in old Quadling, keeper as he was. When they had finished tea, Peter thought it time to ask about procuring lodgings, to which, after a meaning glance at his wife, and a nod in reply from her, the keeper said,

"Well, the last under-keeper lived with his own folks in the village, but I expect it will not be easy to get any lodgings now, for every hole and cranny is full of them painting chaps, who are as thick about here as bees in a hive; so, you see, me and the missis thought as how you might manage in this way. This is a double cottage, and we don't use the other end of it, save for storage, and if you like to live there the missis can see after you, and you can take your meals with us as a lodger. You will have a bed-room, and a room which you can make into a parlour if you have anything to put in it, and your friends can come and see you there when you wish without any trouble to us. The bed-room is already furnished, for we thought from what Mr. Wilson said, that you would be a tidy, steady young man."

This proposal was suitable in every respect. Terms were soon arranged, and Peter's evident sincerity in tendering his thanks made a favourable impression. In truth, for the last few weeks, he had naturally been in a state of nervous tension and uncertainty, and it was very pleasant to feel that for a time at least he had a refuge and a home. At the same time he smiled to think how completely he had merged into the gamekeeper, and what bosh were the ideas of those who affirmed in tale-books and novels, that the appearance of a gentleman (that is, the exterior appearance, the air and bearing) could never be disguised. He was, of course, strictly on his guard not to betray himself, but it was curious how completely and easily he could throw off

the somewhat arrogant tone of an Eton young gentleman, and speak in the natural and unaffected voice of a fairly educated countryman.

"Now draw your chair up to the fire, Peter, and take a pipe."

"Thank ye, Mr. Quadling. I haven't yet learned to smoke."

"Bless me, you don't say so! Well, don't learn, that's all I can say, until you are past five and thirty. Now, what will you drink? I have some whisky, and a barrel of good ale."

"The ale for me, if you please."

"Well, that is my taste too, so we agree. That is a good gun of yours."

And then they had a long talk about guns, dogs, poaching, and so on, until it was supper-time. After which,

"Good night, my lad; I'll take you the rounds to-morrow morning. Here is your room. I hope you will be comfortable."

And Peter found himself alone in a little whitewashed room, the furniture of which consisted of a little bed (which he subsequently had to contrive to lengthen), a chair, a chest of drawers, and a strip of carpet.

Everything was beautifully clean, and Peter was not long in slipping into bed. The coarse sheets were not uncomfortable, but the pillow! it was as hard as it could be, and Peter's heavy head made no impress upon it. What it was stuffed with he could not imagine, but it might have been a log of wood. After vain endeavours to get to sleep, he threw it on the floor, and made a bundle of his clothes, and put them under his head, and fell into a dreamless slumber, from which he did not awake till five o'clock. For a time he could not think where he was. The bright, white room, the cramped bed, the loud crowing of a cock, the clucking of the hens, the bark of a dog, the coo of a ring-dove—all these he saw and heard, and wondered why he heard them. Then it flashed across him that he was indeed Peter Penniless, gamekeeper and gentleman, and he exulted in the thought of his coming labour, and wondered if Jerry felt as

jolly in his school. The fresh morning air, full of the fragrant scent of autumn woods, the blue sky, still tinted with the flush of sunrise, were very pleasant to him as he put his head out of the little window, and peered out through the tunnel in the thick thatch, and over the steep roof, where some tame pigeons were preening themselves. He took long and grateful breaths of the divine air, and was thankful that his lot was not that of a pent-up clerk in a town. To a regular country lad, such as he was, town life would have been unendurable, while here were the woods, the fields, lake, river, and sea—all to be enjoyed daily, and not only for nothing, but he was to be paid for enjoying them. Thus it will be seen that Peter was prepared to take to his work in a spirit which would be bound to make him do his work well.



CHAPTER IV.

Commencement of Peter's duties—The wild-fowl decoy—The first round through the woods.

AS he left his door, which was separate from the door of the other part of the cottage, he met Quadling, who bade him a cheery good-morning, and said he was glad to see him so early astir.

"Just you get outside a basin of bread and milk, and we'll start on our rounds at once."

The grass and the bushes were covered with a silken covering of gossamer, which held the dewdrops imprisoned in it, and the sunbeams turned the dewdrops into sparkling diamonds. All the glades of the wood were carpeted with the fairy gems, and overhead the gorgeous hues of the dying foliage glowed in the morning beams. It was a glorious morning for a walk, provided one was well shod, and Peter and his companion were well protected in this respect.

"Bring your gun, Peter, as we may see a hawk, and I need not carry mine."

"Wants to see how I shoot," thought Peter to himself, and he felt rather nervous.

"Now, I shall take you first to see the decoy, for that is the thing we set most store by here. I suppose you have never heard of taking ducks in a 'coy, have you?"

"I have read of it, but one can't learn much from reading," replied Peter.

"You are right there; besides, there are not half a dozen keepers in England who know anything about decoying, and I don't think there are more than four or five really working decoys in all these eastern counties. Mr. Spencer, who owned this estate, was particularly partial to the decoy, and no gun was



THE LAKE.

allowed to be fired off anywhere near it after the First of November. He has been dead this five year, and Mrs. Spencer she is just as particular to keep the decoy up; and if she weren't, I should be, for it's a curious thing, don't you see, and there's a great mystery and skill about it. Now stand here and look at that lake. Do you see anything remarkable about it?"

They were standing on a slight eminence, clear of wood, which jutted out into the lake like a promontory, and gave a good view of it. Peter looked, and saw a very large sheet of

water, with banks clothed with wood, and very quiet and still it looked. Nothing disturbed its placid surface except a few coots and water-hens swimming about. The lake was shaped

something like an hour-glass—narrow in its mid-length, and expanding at either end. The western end was tolerably open and bare, but the eastern portion was deeply shrouded with wood.

"I notice nothing particular except that this part of the lake has a good many bays running into the wood."

"The decoy pipes lead out of some of those quiet bays. We will take the boat, and I'll show you how they look from the lake."

They went down to a boat-house, which was so hidden in a thicket that Peter had not noticed it, and unlocked the chain of a large flat-bottomed boat, into which they stepped. As they rowed past the tall reed-beds which fringed the shore, Peter observed that it was a likely-looking lake for pike.

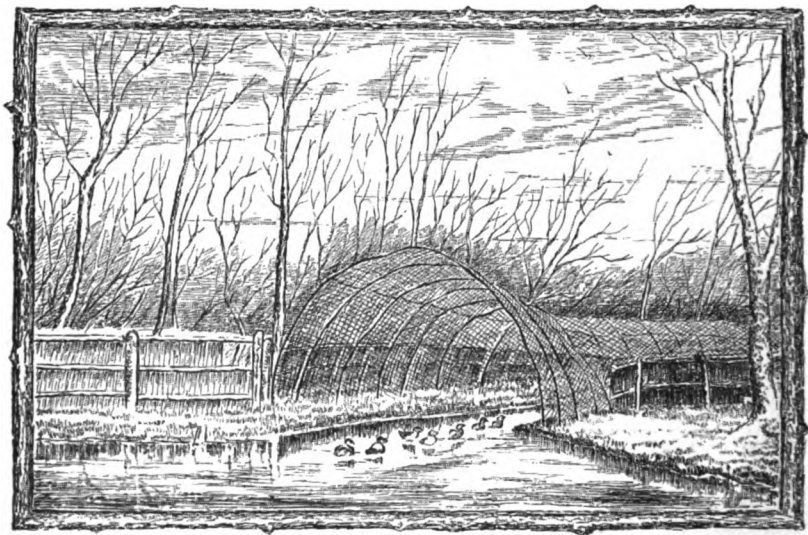
"It is, and no mistake," replied his companion. "The pike are too numerous, because they disturb the ducks, and sometimes pull them under. I have often seen a lot of ducks or teal take flight because a pike has made a grab at one of them. The mallards are too big for them, but they nab a teal now and then and frighten the rest. We give leave to any one who asks to come and fish for them in the summer, but they don't catch many, because the lake is so weedy, and the water is thick with some stuff that grows floating in it and makes it quite green.* Then no one is allowed to come on it after the end of September, and all the autumn and winter, when the weeds are down and the water is clear, there is no fishing for them unless I set a few liggers. If you have a mind to try and thin them out a bit, I shall be main glad."

"There is nothing I should like better. Could we not have a day or two's trimming before the ducks come?" replied Peter.

"Yes, certainly; but the next week will be a rare busy one. Monday and Tuesday we have to drive these woods, and that

* An organism called *Echinella articulata*, a doubtful genus considered by some to be vegetable and by others to be animal.

will be the last of the pheasant shooting within a mile of the 'coy. Wednesday we must ferret the rabbit-burrows, and drive out the rabbits for Thursday, when the farmers and their friends



GENERAL VIEW OF THE DECOY PIPE.

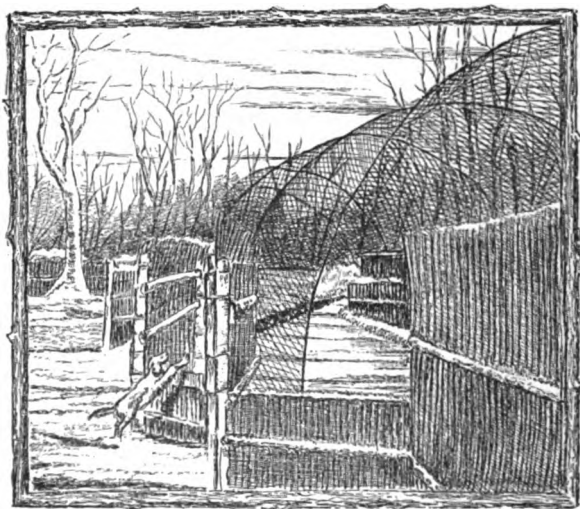
have a day's shooting. That is my party, don't you see? and I look to it to thin the rabbits so that we shan't want to shoot them in these woods after the ducks have come. Friday and Saturday I must mend some of the netting over the pipes, but we can do the liggering as well, and it would be a good thing to ask some of the farmers' sons and their friends to help us do that. I always like to show 'em a little sport now and then. It keeps 'em in a good humour; and if they had a mind to, they could do the 'coy a lot of mischief. Now, here's a pipe."

They were now in a great bay, which was as secluded as it is possible to imagine. The thick wood overhung the water, then came a bed of reeds, then a stretch of water-lilies; and the only open spot where the actual shore seemed accessible was where the decoy pipe was situated. An arch of bent saplings spanned a dyke, and Peter saw that this was but the commencement of a sort of network tunnel, about ten feet high, and eighteen broad at the mouth; but gradually narrowing and decreasing in height, until, at the end, it was only about two feet in diameter. The last ten feet of it were detachable, being formed of network stretched on hoops. The hoop at one end of this "funnel" net slid in a groove, formed of two pairs of posts, to which the end of the fixed pipe was attached, and the extremity of the funnel-net was stretched out, and tied to a post. The dyke over which the pipe was erected was very shallow, and, of course, narrowed as the network did. It was about ninety yards long, and was not straight, but curved from the lake to the right for a quarter of a circle, so that when you were at one end of it, the other was not visible. There were high banks on each side, partly natural and partly artificial, and thickly clothed with underwood, and the outer side of the curve, which was the one from which the decoy was worked, was screened off from the pipe by a series of reed screens, or fences, placed diagonally, with their broad sides inclined towards the lake, and overlapping each other. Thus, any person approaching the pipe in the proper manner, would be perfectly invisible from the lake, but would be able to see up the pipe with ease. The screens were connected with each other by lower cross-fences, which are called dog-jumps, and the use of which will appear in due course. The pipe was approached by traverses, which were deep ditches between embankments, so designed that the pipe could be reached without the person of the keeper being seen by the fowl on the lake.

Mr. Quadling showed Peter three of these bays and pipes, which were all that were then in working order, and one or

another could be worked at all times, according to the direction of the wind.

The object of a decoy is this. Ducks of all kinds feed chiefly at night, and fly abroad for that purpose to pools, marshes, estuaries, and other likely feeding-places, returning at daybreak to the quietest and most sequestered lake they can find, where



DECOY SHOWING DOG JUMPS.

they sleep, rest, and preen themselves during the day. Now, a decoy-pond is designed to give them the absolute secrecy, quiet, and rest which they like. Here they are never disturbed, even by the destruction of hundreds of their companions, for the decoying is carried on with so much secrecy and quiet that, if a score of ducks are having their necks wrung at the funnel of the pipe, the flock of fowl on the water not a hundred yards away are blissfully ignorant of anything unusual happening. As night falls, the ducks fly away to their feeding, and this is

called the "rising of the decoy." At dawn they come back again. The pipes, or lake, must not be approached in the daytime, save for the purpose of working them, and all the work which has to be done in clearing out the dyke, repairing the net, laying down food—barley or corn—in the shallow bay, breaking the ice, and so on, must be done at night.

Quadling explained to Peter that he should expect him to take this night-work, to which he, of course, cheerfully assented.

"I see," said he, "that as you have to keep the woods so quiet, you cannot go in for game-rearing to a large extent."

"Bless you, no! We don't hand-rear any pheasants, unless we have to take up any nests for safety, but there's a good stock of them, because all the shooting here must be done during October. We are sadly troubled with vermin too. They hang about the decoy, and I have not kept up my trapping as I ought, because I have been short-handed and troubled with rheumatism."

"All this network is getting very rotten," said Peter, handling the net which stretched over the wooden arches of the pipe.

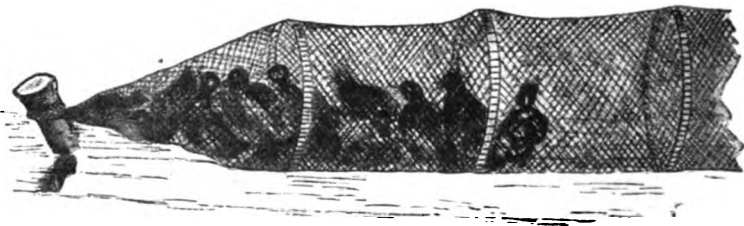
"Yes. By rights, it all ought to be renewed at once. I must see about getting somebody to do the netting."

"Why don't you use galvanized iron netting? It would last for ever, and is not very expensive."

"Why, I never thought of it. That's a good idea, Master Peter. I'll ask Mrs. Spencer if I may try it for one of the pipes. To think that a youngster like you could teach me any new dodge about decoys!"

In reply to Peter's questions, Quadling told him that the ducks were not driven into the pipe, as people who wrote books about what they did not understand supposed, but were enticed up the commencement of the pipe by the motions of a dog, which they followed out of sheer curiosity, and that when they had been so drawn a certain distance up, the keeper got behind them and frightened them the rest of the way up into the funnel or purse-

net. In times past he had taken from two to three thousand mallard, widgeon, and teal in a season, but now he thought himself lucky if he got one thousand five hundred.

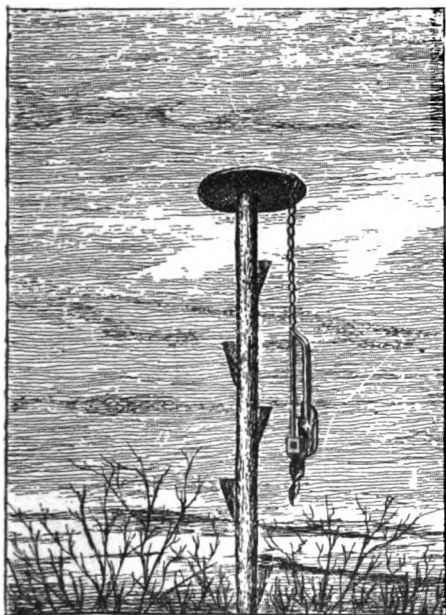


END OF DECOY PIPE.

CHAPTER V

The hawk-trap—Catching a tourist—A snap-shot—Rabbit and stoat—Smuggling—Poachers—Rabbit-warren—Cottagers' sale—The gipsy encampment—In the woods at night—A false alarm.

WHEN they had returned to the little promontory from which they had started, Peter pointed to a very tall



HAWK-TRAP.

pole, planted on the highest part, with chocks of wood nailed on each side alternately all the way up to act as steps of a ladder.

"I suppose that's your hawk-trap?" he said.

"Yes, it is. You see, the pole is just a little taller than the trees hereabouts, and it is on a clear space, so the hawks perch on it to get a clear view round, after their custom, and there is a very good little round

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hawk-trap on the top of it. Lord, how I laughed the other day! As I was passing I saw the trap hanging down by the chain, and something in it that I could not make out, so up I shinned, and what do you think I found? Eh? Why, a part of a coat-sleeve. Good fine cloth, too. Well, I could not make out why any man should be such a fool as to go and put his arm in that trap, but I found out afterwards that two 'gents' from London, who had leave to come and look at the 'coy, were walking along this path, and when they came within sight of the pole, one of them says to the other, 'What can that be for?' So the other says, 'Why, no doubt it is a look-out. There will be a splendid view from there. I'll go up and see.' And up he went till he got to the top, and being out of breath and the wind blowing the tears into his eyes, he did not look closely at what was on the top of the pole, but just threw his arm across, and sprung the trap, which caught his arm. Lucky for him it wasn't his hand. Well, he was so startled that he nearly dropped, and if it had not been for the chain checking him, he would have done so, but he tore his sleeve off and was pretty frightened. He won't go near any hawk-traps again."

As they were walking away along a woodland path, where both the grass and the lower branches of the trees were thickly encrusted with long grey lichens, that imparted a hoary and ancient appearance to the whole grove, they heard the chatter of a jay.

"Shoot that varmin if you see him," said Quadling; "the jays and the magpies are a great trouble to me, for they are not easy to trap, and when they see me creeping along the traverses to the 'coy, they screech out and alarm the ducks."

While he was speaking, Peter caught a glimpse of the jay flying off to his right in a place where only a snap-shot was possible, and he put in practice a trick which Wilson had taught him. He was carrying the gun under his right arm, and, instead of facing round and placing the gun to his right shoulder, he

tossed it up to the left and pulled the trigger with his left hand, thus saving the second which would otherwise have taken the jay out of reach of the shot.

"Well, I'm blowed! did the gun go off accidental?" exclaimed Quadling; but as he saw the jay drop slowly from branch to branch, he said, admiringly, "That was very neat. Can you do it again?"

"I've done it a good many times," replied Peter, laughing "but I won't undertake to do it to order. If my eye gets well hold of a bird I can make the shot go there, but sometimes one's eye is at fault from the beginning."

"That's so, truly. But here we are at the edge of the wood. Our land goes as far as you can see on all sides, and it would be good partridge land but for the want of cover. They mow so close with them reaping machines, and keep every inch of ground so clean, that the birds see us as soon as we enter a field, and commence to run. Look! there is a small covey bolting off now. We had some good shooting, though, during September, but when the gentlemen come again we shall have to use the kite."

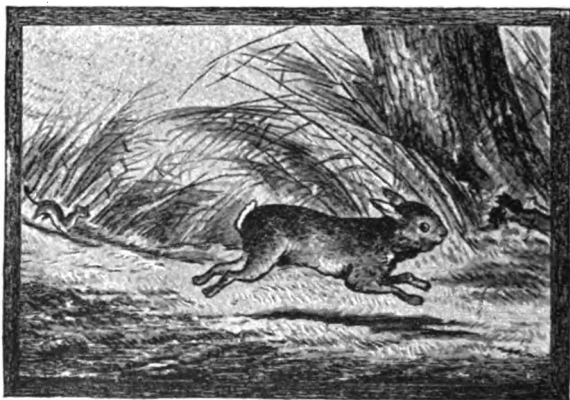
The walk around the bounds of the arable and pasture land was without incident, except that a grey crow afforded Peter an easy shot, contrary to the usual practice of these thieves of the air, and fell dead. As they neared a small coppice a rabbit came leaping along right towards them, in a faltering, hesitating kind of way, as if drawn back by some mysterious force which it was hopeless to attempt to escape from.

"There's a stoat or a weasel on its track, you may depend," said the keeper; and as he spoke the rabbit turned and came so close to Peter that he clapped his hat upon it, and secured it. Holding it in his arms, he waited for a few seconds, and then a stoat made its appearance with its nose to the ground, following slowly but surely the zigzag track of the rabbit. When it came to the spot where Peter had taken up the rabbit, it stopped and

looked puzzled, and then began to make casts to and fro, to try and hit off the scent again, the two keepers being all the time within a few yards of it. Quadling took Peter's gun, and put an end to the stoat, and then Peter put the rabbit down. It bolted off as fast as its legs could carry it, and was soon in a distant burrow.

"There, now ; why couldn't it run like that when the stoat was after it ?" asked Peter.

"I don't know. I suppose it must know that, however fast and far it may run, the stoat would have it at last, and it loses heart because it knows that it has no chance. I remember once



RABBIT AND STOAT.

though, I was watching a snare, hoping that the man who set it would come and be caught, and I saw a big rabbit fairly drive a weasel away. The rabbit had young ones, and she seemed to have no fear, but jumped on the weasel with her fore feet, until it fairly turned tail and bolted."

They had now reached the bank of a nice little stream, which

ran through the property, and fell into the main river through a pair of sluice-gates.

"Mr. Spencer had a great idea of making this a trout stream, but there has been nobody to fish it from the Hall, and the pike have become numerous."

"Has Mrs. Spencer no sons?"

"Only one, a boy of fourteen or thereabouts, who is at Eton."

Peter started. He did not remember any boy of that name, but then there were scores of boys in the lower school whom Peter would not know. Peter himself had, however, been a swell wetbob, and the lower form boy might know him by sight well enough. He hoped, however, that his keeper's dress was a sufficient disguise, and he felt his lip and chin anxiously to see if the down thereon was of sufficient substance to give promise of whiskers.

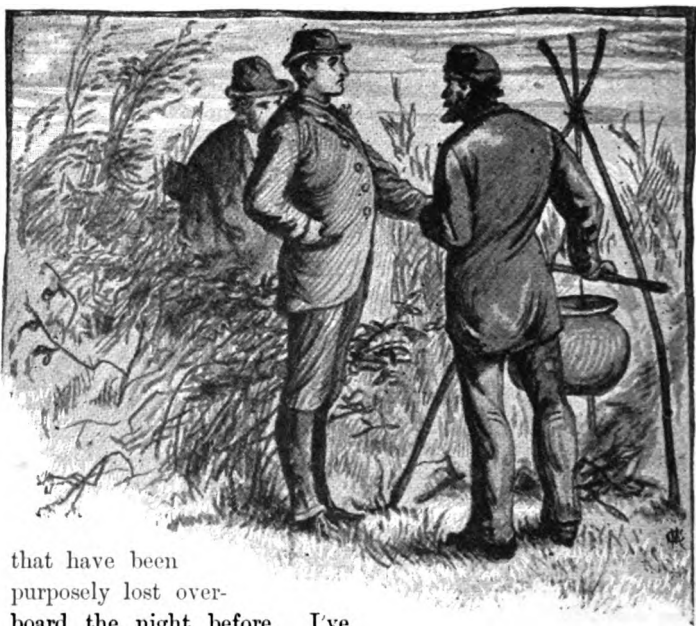
Crossing the stream, they presently arrived at the river, which wound its devious way between crowded banks. It now looked a noble stream, or rather a series of lakes; but Qualling explained that the tide was in, and that at low tide there was but a small channel trickling between great expanses of mud.

The river was the boundary of the property on that side, and they followed it down to the village—an irregular cluster of houses, with three public houses of a low class, and two or three general shops. The inhabitants were partly seafaring and partly agricultural, and in their dress bore traces of both occupations.

"What a lot of curs there are about!" remarked Peter.

"Yes, too many. That's because of the warren over there which belongs to us. The men walk along the sea-shore, where nobody can say them nay, and their dogs make a dash into the warren and back with a rabbit. Then the men who wear guernseys have no pockets to put the rabbits in, so often a boat is rowed close in shore, and the dogs take the rabbits out to it. The beach is so steep, too, that the boat's stern can be shoved close enough for the dog to jump in without getting out of its depth

It's my belief, too, that a little smuggling goes on here under the very noses of the coastguard. They board any yacht that comes in, but they never look at the little shrimpers that go out trawling in the bay, and may at the same time pick up cargoes



that have been purposely lost overboard the night before. I've noticed that two of the shrimping boats go right up the river for a couple of miles, and land their shrimps at a cottage just opposite our farthest coppice. It's an out-of-the-way place to take shrimps to be boiled, and then walk back with them to Wetacre to sell to a dealer from Crostwich. There's a bit of sea-poaching in that, I know. There's a dodge somewhere, but I can't make out as those same men ever touch my pheasants, so I have no call to meddle with them."

A sale was going on at one of the cottages where the tenant

had lately died, and as there were few buyers, and things were going cheap, Peter stopped, and became possessed, with his senior's approval, of a table, two chairs—one an arm-chair—and a little book-case, for a pound; and, with these and a small strip of carpet, he proposed to furnish the lower of his two rooms.

The gipsy encampment was still on the common between the warren and the wood, and the inevitable pot was bubbling over the fire. Peter stepped up to it, and, with his Eton cheekiness, was about to stir up its contents to see what it was that had such a savoury smell, but a brawny gipsy rose up, and threatening Peter with a stick, said,

"You have no right to touch that, master; and if you don't let it alone, I'll make you."

Peter measured the man with his eye. Already he looked upon poachers as his mortal enemies, although not many months before he had indulged in some extensive poaching on his own account. He was about to persevere in his search and risk the consequences, but Quadling restrained him, and he contented himself with a leisurely prowl around the tents, looking in at the doors, and kicking a dog which snarled at him.

"Now, Peter," said Quadling, "don't be too zealous. It does harm. Don't force a fight unless you've got to secure your poacher in the act. What good would it have done to any one if you had got hold of that fellow, as you were itching to do? Be crafty, lad, be crafty; that's the way to catch 'em."

"No doubt, Mr. Quadling, I was a bit hasty. I will remember what you say."

Peter's afternoon was employed in cleaning out the kennels and the ferret-hutches, and afterwards in making his own two rooms tidy, and according to his mind, as well as the limited nature of his materials would allow. After dark, Quadling instructed him to take the same round that they had done in the morning, and at ten o'clock he started.

It is a peculiar feeling that of being out in the woods alone as night. There was no moon, but the sky was clear and the stars shone bright. There was not a breath of wind, so that there was no noise of swaying branches, but there were many noises of different kinds which were difficult to account for. The patter of the falling leaves was very distinct, and they might have been bits of stick, or even something heavier, so loud were the sounds. Then there were mysterious rustlings in the undergrowth, curious taps and knocks on the trees, sighs as of creatures in pain, and then perhaps for a space an absolute stillness. The strange mystery of the woods had at all times an attractiveness to Peter, but this was his first turn of night duty, and he was more than ordinarily impressed by the consciousness of the darkness and the unknown. At last it seemed as if all the wood around him were alive and watching him, as if every tree stretched out a mocking arm; and when a barn-owl floated like a cloud past his head, and at the same moment he caught sight of a pair of eyes gleaming out of the darkness at him, his heart seemed to stand still, and he felt almost in a funk. He recovered himself in a moment, and, concluding that the baleful green eyes were those of a poaching cat, he flung his stick at it (he had left his gun at home), and then had to grope about for some time before he recovered the stick.

When he got out of the wood and into the open, he walked close to the hedges, peering into the gloom, and stopping every now and then to listen for the scream of a hare or the step of a poacher, for his imagination made him think that every shadow was a midnight marauder, and he felt fully prepared to tackle any number, notwithstanding the rebuke he had received from Quadling at the gipsy encampment. But he saw nothing, and about half-past twelve o'clock he was walking through the wood by the riverside, and watching two shrimping boats that were rowing out to sea, when he heard a stick crack. Instantly he crouched to the ground and listened. Truly there was a foot

step approaching, and he endeavoured to get the new arrival between him and the sky-line. At last he made out the dark figure of a man coming his way, and it passed close by him. With his heart beating furiously, and every muscle quivering with excitement, he sprang up and seized the intruder by the collar—to find that it was Quadling.

“God bless me, boy! don’t grip so hard. You have nearly throttled me. Why, your knuckles are made of iron.”

Peter was profuse in his apologies; but Quadling good-naturedly said that it was his own fault only, and that he was pleased Peter had had pluck enough.

“The missis wouldn’t let me go to sleep. She said I had no business to send you out at night by yourself for the first time; and when I said you were big enough, she said you had but a boy’s face, and could have but a boy’s heart. So I got up and dressed, and came to meet you; and now she’ll have to sew fresh buttons on my shirt where you’ve torn them off.”

They walked home together, and Peter minded his hard pillow not the least, but slept a sound and healthy sleep.



CHAPTER VI.

Wetacre folk—Poaching cats—Human poachers—Gerard's arrival—The harbour
—Hauling a vessel over the bar—Gerard's school—Peter's resolve—The
amateur's pulpit.

"TELL you what it is, Mr. Quadling," said his wife to him, as she was sewing his shirt-button on the next morning, "you seem to be quite proud of being nearly throttled by your under-keeper."

"I like the lad's pluck, missis. But don't you talk. You've got a soft place in your heart for him, I can see, or you wouldn't have turned me out of bed last night."

"He's only a boy, and a motherless boy too, and I'll take what care of him I can," responded the good woman, whose heart was not so shrewish as her tongue often was. "He speaks like a gentleman, except that he doesn't put on any parts. I expect he has been brought up beyond his parents' means; but it hasn't spoilt him."

"He has a brother, or half-brother rather, of the name of Longley, who has had better schooling than him, and has got a place as pupil teacher or under-master in a school at Crostwich. So we shall have him over here to see Penniless soon."

"Well, if he gives as little trouble as Peter, he shall be welcome."

After breakfast Quadling said to Peter, "To-day being Saturday is a good day to see the people in Wetacre. They don't do much work any day of the week, but Saturday is more idle than

any other. I've got to engage some beaters for Monday, and I want to show you if I can who are the men likely to poach when they get the chance."

At the door of one of the cottages Quadling pointed out a group of no less than six cats basking in the sunshine.

"There's six of the worst poachers in the village," he said; "they belong to that old woman, and I believe they are about the warren or the woods every night, and each brings home a rabbit for their mistress. They keep clear of all my traps, and I can never get a shot at them. Look how they slope away when they see me. And old Betty Saunders and her granddaughter Sue are coming to see what is the matter."

Sure enough, the cats had slipped away to the back premises, not hurriedly, as if afraid of the keeper, but with the greatest *nonchalance* and apparent indifference, but still they had gone. They were all tabbies of great size, and one had a crooked fore leg, from previous acquaintance with a trap.

"Well, Betty, how are rabbits selling?" asked Quadling.

"I know nawthin' about rabbits," answered Betty, surlily.

"Then what does Miss Susan there take in her donkey-cart to Crostwich every week?"

"What's that to you?" answered the strapping wench, a bold, good-looking girl of twenty, gazing with some interest at Peter.



Their next visit was to a public house bearing the sign of the Anchor.

"That is a low place ; and Vince, the landlord, is in with the poachers, and helps them to get their game away. He has been convicted once. We must have him again before long."

A policeman stopped to speak to Quadling, and when he had gone, Peter observed, "I suppose that is the policeman stationed here ; but I don't like the look of him—he has such a hanglog face."

"Ay, he is too fond of drinking with the men in the public. He never gives me any information, and I don't take no account of him at all. Now, there's the very worst man of the lot. Been convicted a dozen times, and ain't particular about using a loaded stick. Don't you ever tackle him by yourself. He got three months for breaking the head of my last under-keeper."

The man indicated was a short broad man of immensely powerful build, dressed in a shabby suit of velveteen. He was followed by a lurcher dog, which looked as bad a character as its master. His name was Bunt, and he had no ostensible occupation, being in fact a professed poacher, defiant of every one. He usually lodged at Vince's, but did not confine his operations to this district alone, the head of game kept not being large, owing to the neighbourhood of the decoy, which was inimical to shooting.

The services of a dozen men to act as beaters were soon secured, and permission given them to bring their boys with them, upon condition that they prevented them straying beyond the line of beaters.

After the job was over, and Quadling and Peter were returning home, the latter caught sight of a bicycle-rider descending the slope, and in another minute Peter and Gerard were shaking hands. After a few words of welcome, Quadling left them to their own devices ; and they chose to go down to the little pier that jutted out at the mouth of the harbour and watch an operation which had strongly aroused Peter's interest some time before.

At the mouth of the river there was a bar, which shifted its position with every change of wind or high tide. Owing to this, but few vessels visited the port, although there had formerly been a good trade there. The bar was formed of shingle, so loosely drifted together that it was possible to haul vessels through it, the swift current carrying away the pebbles loosened by the vessel's keel. For this purpose there were huge capstans fixed on the pier, and at the present moment there was a brig of about a hundred tons on the bar, and thick ropes from her bows were led around two of the capstans, at the spokes of which a number of men were hauling, in time to the burden of a hauling ditty. The cries of the men, the grinding and crushing of the pebbles, the swirl and rush of the rising tide, and the straining ropes and swelling sails, gave a curious effect of bustle to the sleepy port. At last, and by a concentrated effort just at the top of the tide, the brig was drawn over the bar, and started up the river to her moorings.

The boys then found a place sheltered from the wind and exposed to the sun, and sat themselves down to exchange confidences. With Peter's doings we are already acquainted. Gerard shall tell his own.

"Mr. Blackwood has been awfully kind to me. He was glad to give me a berth as usher, or, as I call it, mathematical master. He has thirty boys in his school, and they are not a bad lot, but a' small boys, of course, as it is a preparatory school. I am to live in the house. It is rather dull, but I shall be comfortable, and it is better than I could have expected. But, I say, old man——"

"Yes?"

"I was obliged to tell him all about you, you know, but he will keep the secret. He thinks, though, that you should only look upon it as a temporary occupation, and that you should try and make up for lost time at school."

"Exactly," interrupted Peter; "that's what I mean to do.

I mean to take two hours every day or night, and study plain and useful things. I shall begin with writing pothooks and hangers, and stick at that until I can write decently; and I shall begin with simple addition, and work at figures until I could take a prize in mental arithmetic. I am going in for useful accomplishments, and let Latin and Greek slide."

And I may here say, that Peter kept his resolve faithfully. With Gerard's help, in the way of getting him books, Peter stuck at his studies at odd times, like the determined young brick that he was, and, as he acquired proficiency, he went in for book-keeping and other commercial requirements. His chief difficulty was with his writing, for his daily manual occupations were not favourable to the acquirement of a good style. He also read every book on farming matters that he could procure, until he knew the theory of it by heart, and he never failed to compare such theories with the practice of the farmers around him, and nothing pleased him more than to enter into a discussion on such matters with the farmers. He was greatly assisted in all such things by a weekly perusal of the *Field*. This was regularly taken at the Hall, and towards the end of the next week was sent down to the keepers, frequently uncut when there were no gentlemen visitors staying with Mrs. Spencer.

But I am anticipating a great deal. I shall, however, have no occasion to refer to Peter's studies again, if my readers will only bear in mind that, side by side with his active outdoor life which I have to describe for your amusement, he was steadily qualifying himself for any future advancement that might be open to him.

"I say, Peter, there was such a joke yesterday. Mr. Paul, a curate of one of the churches of Crostwich, is expecting a living to be vacant soon, to which he will be presented. He asked Mr. Blackwood and myself to be at his house to inspect a carved oak pulpit which he has himself made and carved for his church when he gets it. It was a splendid pulpit, with all the joints

dovetailed and glued together so that they could not possibly be pulled apart without smashing the whole concern, and it was very nicely carved. He had made it in a small back room upstairs, and when I looked at the door and window I couldn't think how he would get it out. So I asked him ; and just fancy, it had never occurred to him that it would not pass through either door or window ! He was in such a state that if we had not been there I believe he would have cried. He measured and measured, but at last gave it up as a bad job, and said, 'I've brought you here only to show you what a fool I have been. All my labour is in vain, for I cannot afford to break the wall down and build it up again.' Whatever is he to do, Peter ?

"Well, I should say he had better saw the pulpit in halves lengthways, and then cut tenons and mortices to fit it together again, and conceal the joints by a carved scroll."

"Capital ! I'll tell him. But, I say, we have a whole holiday every Saturday. Do you think Quadling would mind my coming to see you often ?"

"Not at all, if you will come on my rounds with me so as not to hinder my work. And you might stay the Sunday, too. I will net a hammock by next time you come, so that you can sleep in my room. My bed isn't big enough for two. Now come round the decoy with me. I've got to drag the weeds out of one of the pipes."

And when Quadling came that way a couple of hours later he was uncommonly pleased to find that both the lads were hard at work clearing the pipe in a thoroughly effective manner, neither of them being lads to shirk any work to which they might put their hands.

Peter told Gerard that Mrs. Spencer had a son at Eton, and asked if he remembered him.

"No," replied Gerard, "he must have been quite a new-comer, I should say. He won't know you. I should hardly know you myself. He is more likely to know me if he sees me."

CHAPTER VII.

October weather—The pheasant *battue*—The errant beater—The French sportsman's vagaries—Mrs. Spencer and Colonel Harvey—Blank cartridges—The Frenchman shoots a fox—A towering pheasant—An unlucky accident.

THAT fine, calm, somewhat misty weather, which so often characterizes October in England, still prevailed, and the woods were gorgeous indeed as Peter looked out over them at daybreak on the Monday morning. Their mellow stillness was to be rudely broken that day, however; and Peter looked forward with eagerness to the coming *battue*. He had taken part in two before, but then it was as master, not as servant. The fact that his position had so much changed did not, however, affect his spirits in the least, and he assisted heartily in the necessary preparations.

After breakfast Quadling left Peter to marshal the troop of beaters, while he went up to the Hall to meet the gentlemen and accompany them to the wood. The plan arranged was to beat the woods on the south side of the decoy first, placing the guns in the open glades and spaces about the middle of the wood, and beating the woods from each end in turn, the configuration of the ground rendering this the best plan on both sides of the lake. Peter's instructions were to marshal the beaters at the east end of the wood by ten o'clock, and when he heard Quadling's double dog-whistle three times repeated, he was to commence the beat. The beaters assembled in good time, and were obedient enough to his directions; but the boys, to the number of about a score, were unruly and troublesome enough. Peter therefore armed

himself with a long dog-whip, and a few cuts of this, judiciously administered, had a beneficial effect. By the time named he had the beaters regularly arranged within hail of each other, and the boys between. Peter kept in the centre of the line, and retained two of the fleetest boys by his side, as his *aides-de-camp*, to run with messages when required.

All was ready, and waiting, and Peter was listening anxiously for the sound of the whistle, which, as the wind, though light, was from the eastward, he feared might not reach him. At last it came, faint but clear, and three times repeated; the signal ran along the line, and off they started, the men shouting, beating the bushes, and hitting the tree-trunks; the boys halloaing, and so eager to get forward, that Peter's emissaries were continually being dispatched to recall them; and the spaniels and setters hunting the underwood with as much eagerness, and more intelligence, than the beaters.

The noise, as the party went crashing through the underwood, aroused all the denizens of the wood. Jays and magpies flew screaming and chattering away; wood-pigeons rose in clouds and redoubled the clatter; the pretty little squirrels ran quickly up to the very tops of the trees, and peered anxiously down with their bright black eyes; a fox, doubling back, came so close to Peter, that he caught him a slash with his whip. The uproar seemed to bring the leaves down faster than ever, and very singular was the effect of this yellow and brown rain of leaves as it caught the sunlight on it through the baring branches.

Presently a shot was heard, and then another, and from that time the noise of the guns was pretty constant. Peter had some trouble with his beaters. Some were inclined to shirk the awkward places, and it was just in these places that the pheasants were likely to run back. Peter was determined that they should go straight through everything, thick and thin, and forgetting himself in the excitement of rating the recalcitrant beaters, he spoke in the imperious tone and marked accent which somehow

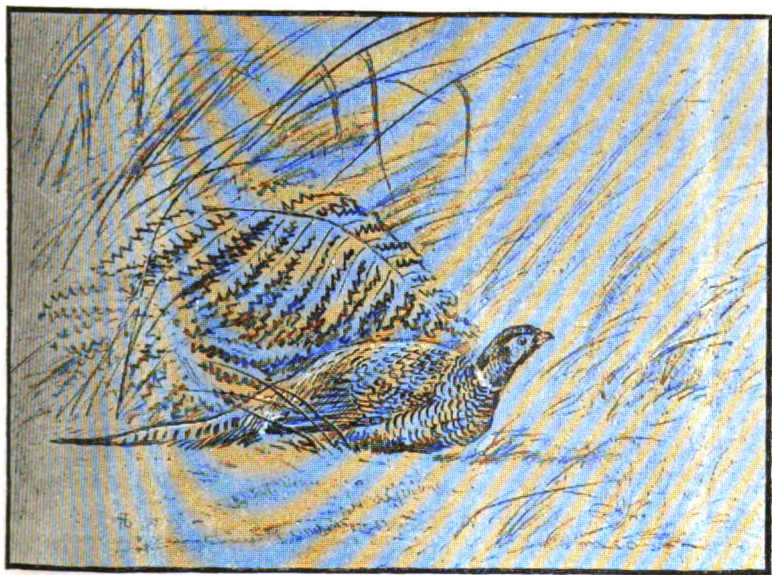
characterizes a gentleman educated at a public school. He saw a beater, named Lee, knock a rabbit over with his stick, and then hide it under a bush. Not knowing quite what to do, Peter noted the place in his mind's eye, and waited until he could ask Quadling.

Leaving Peter for a while, and going to the open spaces, where the guns were posted, we see that there were five gentlemen shooting, and a middle-aged lady looking on. The most noticeable of the men was Colonel Harvey, Mrs. Spencer's brother, and it was to him that Quadling looked for orders. The only other gentleman who need be mentioned was, however, a very remarkable one. He was a distinguished French novelist, named Monsieur Malahide, and as he had also written a manual of *Le Sport*, he fancied himself a great authority. He was a guest at the Hall, and Mrs. Spencer had persuaded her brother and Quadling to post him in the best place, and they had done so. Quadling himself was stationed as his loader and attendant, some temporary assistant keepers doing the same for the other guns. But Monsieur Malahide had his own notions as to shooting. He fired wildly and anyhow, with about as much notion of aim as a British soldier of the present time, and if he did not hit anything, he made himself excessively dangerous to himself, to the keepers, and the guns on each side of him about fifty yards away. His shooting was so erratic, that Quadling whipped out his pocket-knife and sliced off the end of every cartridge, so that all the shot ran out before he loaded. Of course he had to load one gun while the Frenchman was wildly flourishing the other about; but the latter was so intent on the escaping game, that he had no suspicion of the trick that was being played upon him.

Mrs. Spencer had come up behind the keeper, and she saw what he was doing, and was wise enough to divine the reason for it. But Quadling was rather perturbed when he discovered her presence; but at a reassuring nod from her, he kept on extracting the shot.

"Pray, what young gentleman is that whose voice I hear with the beaters, Quadling?" she asked.

"It is no young gentleman, ma'am. It is the new under-keeper Peter Penniless. His parents were small farmers, and brought him up better than they could afford; but they are dead, and he



A CUNNING OLD COCK.

is not above his work, but lays himself into it heart and soul, in spite of his fine manner of speech."

Just then the line of beaters emerged simultaneously out of the wood, Peter with them. He took off his hat to Mrs. Spencer, who gave him a pleasant word or two, and looked somewhat curiously at him, possibly struck by the contrast between his great size and his boyish handsome face.

While the beaters picked up and arranged the game, Monsieur Malahide discoursed eloquently to his hostess of the narrow escapes some of the game had had from his gun, and he was fully convinced that some of the pheasants which had fallen to his neighbours' guns (for of course they had, on discovering the state



WHICH LOST ITS TAIL.

of things, fired at his birds, as well as those which rose near them) were slain by his blank cartridges. The other gentlemen held a conference, and Colonel Harvey came to Quadling and said,

“For the rest of the day, post Monsieur Malahide by himself, where he can’t hurt anybody, and won’t see much to shoot at. You come with me, and send a man you can trust with him, to try and keep him from hurting himself.”

So, Quadling, after letting Peter into the secret, sent him off with "mounseer" to the corner of the wood next the lake, well away from every one else, knowing that but a small proportion of the game would find their way out there. Another man was placed in charge of the beaters, who, after refreshing themselves with the small beer brought down for them, proceeded to the western end of the wood, and to beat from that to the same place.

Peter was very doubtful whether he could successfully imitate his senior's trick with the cartridges, but, as it turned out, he had no occasion to do so. Monsieur Malahide put in the first two cartridges himself, and took up his allotted station with Peter behind him carrying the second gun, also loaded with shot. The noise of the beaters commenced as before, but faint at first, and gradually growing louder as they approached. The small birds were the first to leave the wood; then Peter saw a hare leaping out some distance to his right, and before it had gone many yards it was bowled over by a shot from the colonel. Then came some rabbits and more hares, all well up to the right, away from Peter's station; then the first pheasant, which fell to a long shot from somebody. After this the pheasants came, and pretty regularly, and the shooting was equally regular and effective. All this time nothing had come near Monsieur, and he was becoming volubly impatient. At last a cunning old cock pheasant ran out within a few yards, trying to hide in the ferns. Peter picked up a missile to throw at it, and make it rise; but before he could do so Monsieur had fired, the pheasant being then about ten yards off. He *blew off its tail*, but the bird itself rose screaming, and flew away. The Frenchman ran and picked up its tail.

"Ah, that was a *splendide* shot! When they do rise, they do make such a—what you call it—*spufflutter*, that it shakes me, and it is *difficile* to hit them; but when they runs on the ground, my aim it is deadly."

Peter kept his countenance admirably, and handed over the second gun. Monsieur had just taken it in his hands when a fox

stole out of the cover, and passed just in front of the barrels. It was the purest accident in the world, but the start caused by the sudden appearance of such an animal made monsieur pull the trigger; and the contents of both barrels bowled over the fox, while the gun flew out of the hands of its holder, who had not raised it higher than his waist. After an astonished pause, Monsieur flung himself on the body of the hapless fox, and seized it by the throat, giving tongue at the same time to such a yell of triumph, that Quadling, who heard it, thought that an accident had happened, and came running down. When he saw the Frenchman busy throttling the dead fox, and Peter dancing about, speechless with laughter, he ran back in a hurry, holding his sides, and laughing so much, that he could scarcely acquaint the colonel with what had happened.

When Monsieur had got over his excitement, he found that his knuckles were sore from the kick of the gun, and he could not shoot any more.

"No, my honour is vindicated, and I care not for the labour of more shooting, which has hurt my finger, my shoulder, and has ached my head. Shoot you for me, my friend. It will be the same thing."

Peter knocked over a brace of pheasants and a couple of rabbits just to show Monsieur how neatly they could be shot, but he did not fire at anything else, although three or four woodcocks came by within easy shot, as he knew that keepers ought not to shoot game on their own account.

When the drive was over the shooters met in the centre of the open space, Monsieur Malahide insisting upon carrying his fox himself. He threw it down upon the heap of the slain, and folding his arms, looked round for approval. To his astonishment he met with silence and grave faces. The gentlemen had determined to have a little fun out of him. Colonel Harvey was the first to speak.

"You will not wonder at our concern, Monsieur Malahide, when I say that you have, unwittingly no doubt, committed a

crime only one degree less heinous than that of murder. The fox is to Englishmen a sacred animal, to be killed only by the fair method of fox-hunting, with the aid of hounds and on horseback. If it were known to the neighbours, they would gather round and would lynch you."

"Ah, how unlucky I am!" sighed the culprit. "But what is *linsh*?"

"To administer justice without the preliminary of a legal trial. They might string you up to yonder pole" (pointing to the hawk-trap); "but we will do our best to shield you. Here, Quadling, fling the fox out of sight into the wood."

"Ah, I collapse! I am squashed! What will Mrs. Spencer say to me for killing her dear fox?"

"She will say nothing if she doesn't know. Hush! here she comes," as Mrs. Spencer made her appearance in company with the luncheon, and two other ladies.

"I will shoot no more, but devote myself to the fair," which he did, and also to the champagne, and the effect of the latter was so marked that his companions were devoutly thankful that his shooting had been put a stop to.

After luncheon the woods on the other side of the lake were driven in the same way, and without any incident save one, which might have been more serious than it was. One of the guns shot at a pheasant, which, on being hit, "towered" to a great height, going almost straight into the air. This action seems to sometimes occur in birds of different kinds if they have been wounded in the head. Rabbits, if so wounded, will often run in narrowing circles until they drop. The wound is always a fatal one, and it is not quite clear what the effect is due to, although it is supposed that it has something to do with an injury to the brain. Well, this pheasant towered very high indeed, and then closed its wings and fell plump down with great velocity, and of course considerable force. Unluckily, it hit the Frenchman plump on the head, and knocked him down. He

had a tall stiff hat on, or he might have been killed, but as it was he was no little stunned. His hat was forced down over his mouth, and his nose and the cigar he had been smoking were both wedged in a split. As he was helped to his feet, he feebly gasped, "Ah, what a stroke! Was it the linsh law for the fox, or was it a fire of lightning?"

When the cause of the accident was explained to him, he declared that English sport was far too full of danger, and that there was no glory in it, and he decided to retire from it forthwith. He accepted Peter's arm and escort up to the Hall, and when he got there he took out his purse to extract the "tip" which he was aware the gamekeeper would expect. Peter saw that it contained several sovereigns but only one piece of silver, and that was a sixpence. Taking out a sovereign and sixpence, he was in grievous doubt which he should give. The approach of one of the ladies from the terrace decided him, and he gave the sovereign to Peter with an ostentatious air of liberality. Peter thanked him civilly and withdrew, but he felt exceedingly unhappy at having to accept a tip. His good sense speedily came to his aid, however. The tip was a customary matter of business, and he supposed he should share it with Quadling, so he made up his mind that the matter should not trouble him further.

When the shooting was over, he told Quadling of the beater, Lee, having killed and hidden the rabbit.

"Dear me! that is a pity. He is a steady man enough, and I never heard of his poaching. Lee—come here."

Lee came up, looking rather sheepish.

"Now, Lee, what did you kill that rabbit for? You know that it is my duty to get you convicted for poaching."

"If you please, Mr. Quadling, I never did such a thing before. We are hard up; my wife is sick, and the children are hungry, and I thought one rabbit would not be missed."

"No more it will, Lee, and I would have given you one directly, if you had asked me. But nothing grows on a man like poach-

ing. It's a big step on the way to the devil, is poaching. I ought to read you a sharp lesson. What do you say, Peter?"

"Make him give his word of honour not to poach again, and let him off this time," suggested Peter.

"Word of honour!" exclaimed Quadling. "Where have you been brought up, to talk of honour with the likes of him?"

"You may trust me, indeed, Mr. Quadling. Let me off now, and strike me dead if I ever poach again!"

"Well, well, take your rabbit and wage, and be off with you."

When they got home, Quadling said to his wife,

"Mrs. Lee is sick, and the children hungry. He says he is out of work. Just go and look after them the next day or two, and take something for them to eat."

Peter offered to share his sovereign with the keeper, but the latter refused to do so, and told him to keep it, as well as any other tips he might get; and this sovereign found its way at an early date into the post-office savings bank.

Peter also obtained the fox's skin for the trouble of skinning it, and the carcase was divided among the dogs and the ferrets.



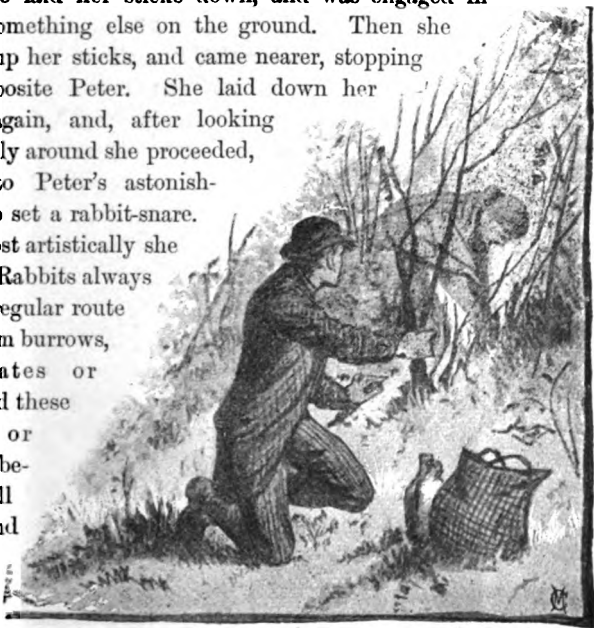
CHAPTER VIII.

Driving the rabbits out—Rabbit-snaring—An old woman poacher—Watching in the ditch—A young woman poacher—The capture—What should he do with her?

ON the Wednesday morning, both keepers made an early start of it, their object being to start the rabbits from the burrows, so that they might be out for the morrow's rabbit drive. Quadling took three ferrets, which he had previously given a bath in a solution of that foul-smelling stuff, assafoetida. Taking an assistant with him, and fastening each ferret to a line, so that it should not escape or remain in the holes, he proceeded to pass the ferrets a little way into all the burrows on the beat he selected. The smell of the ferrets and the drug combined would so offend the rabbits, that they would, when the coast was clear, leave their burrows, and not return to them for a day or two, preferring rather to lie out in the woods than to be incommoded by the unwelcome odour in their homes. Quadling undertook to work the woods where the burrows were not so easily found by a stranger. Peter was told to take the outlying burrows in the hedgerows, but he could not have any ferrets, because all the others were ill of distemper. He was, therefore, compelled to make use of another dodge. He had cut a large number of small pegs, with a slit at one end of each. In this slit was inserted a piece of newspaper, doubled two or three

times. Armed with a basket of these papered pegs, and a tin bottle of paraffin, he set out to perform his portion of the task.

And this was the way he did it. When he came to a group of burrows, he would take his pegs, dip the paper into the paraffin, and stick the peg well into the mouth of the hole. He was particular not to miss any burrow, so that it took him a considerable time, and ere his task was half done it was one o'clock, and he lay down in the hedge to eat his bread and meat, and drink the bottleful of cold tea which he had brought with him. Presently he heard the crack of a stick the other side of the hedge. Peeping through, he saw an old woman, bent with age, picking up sticks, and he recognized old Betty Saunders. But soon she laid her sticks down, and was engaged in doing something else on the ground. Then she picked up her sticks, and came nearer, stopping just opposite Peter. She laid down her sticks again, and, after looking cautiously around she proceeded, much to Peter's astonishment, to set a rabbit-snare. And most artistically she did it. Rabbits always take a regular route to or from burrows, and gates or gaps, and these routes, or "runs," become well beaten and easily recognizable.



RABBIT SNARING.

Another curious thing with respect to these runs is, that every eight or nine inches along them the grass or ground is more beaten or worn than in the interval. The reason of this is, that rabbits jump along, rather than run or gallop; and these patches mark where the rabbits' feet strike most often. A spring trap should be set on these patches, but a wire snare must be set just on the edge of one—of course, in the exact centre of the run. Now, the old woman was well up to this, and sticking the peg, to which the cone was attached, well into the ground, she opened the noose about three inches, and measured the correct height of the bottom of the noose from the ground, in the well-known poachers' manner—that is, by placing the clenched fist on the ground, with the little finger downwards, and letting the wire just touch the thumb-joint.

When Betty Saunders had set the snare, she picked up her sticks and moved a little farther, until she found another well-defined run, where she repeated the operation.

"Well, this is a run go!" said Peter to himself; "that rheumatic old woman can't come after those snares to-night. She must have an accomplice to come and take them up, for her cats surely can't do it. I won't disturb her now, but come to-night and watch for her friend, and then I shall get both. But I wonder how she can mark the places where the snares are, so that her pal can find them?"

When Betty had gone to a safe distance, Peter crept out and examined the snare. It was not made of the wire ordinarily used by the poachers, but was made of picture-wire of three strands, the advantage being that it is stiff enough without being springy and runs freely.

Peter finished his paraffining the burrows as quickly as he could, but it was past six o'clock when he returned home, and he found that Quadling had driven to Crostwich to fetch home the galvanized wire netting which had been ordered for the repair of the decoy-pipe. Peter therefore resolved to watch for the

snarer alone ; and, after tea, he left without telling Mrs. Quadling of his intention, and by nine o'clock he was lying in the dry ditch within a few yards of the snare he had seen set. He had brought a bit of tarpauling (which he had taken off a pheasant-coop) to put under him, and some sacks to keep his legs warm, and snugly esconced under the overhanging bramble and fern of

the ditch-side, he lay watching for the poacher. It was a still night, with a slight drizzle of rain, and dark, with occasional faint gleams of moonlight through misty clouds.

Peter had clothed himself warmly, and did not feel cold, nor was he much excited. To tell the truth, his labours of the last few days had made him very sleepy, and, after an hour of waiting, he actually dropped off



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into a snooze, from which he was awakened by something pattering over his legs. No doubt it was a weasel or a rat, but it startled him and made him broad awake and his senses acute. Then he heard the unmistakeable sound of a footstep crunching the wet grass. He then became aware that there was a rabbit struggling in the snare, which had evidently been caught while Peter was napping. Then a slight, dark figure stooped down to seize the rabbit, and with a bound Peter was on the

top of the figure, claspings it round the arms to prevent it struggling. But he nearly let it go again in his astonishment. The dress was that of a man, but the scream was that of a woman, and the soft rounded figure was clearly not of the masculine gender.

"Who on earth are you?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Penniless!" said a frightened girl's voice.

"Yes, but who are you, and why are you dressed like this?"

"If you please, sir, don't hurt me, and I will tell you. I am Susie Saunders."

"Whew!" whistled Peter; "and is this your usual game?"

"Not very often, and only when Mr. Quadling is away. Please let me go. Don't send me to gaol. We are so poor, and my grandmother makes me do it," implored the girl, sobbing violently.

"I can't let you go," replied Peter, "but I'll be shot if I know what to do with you."

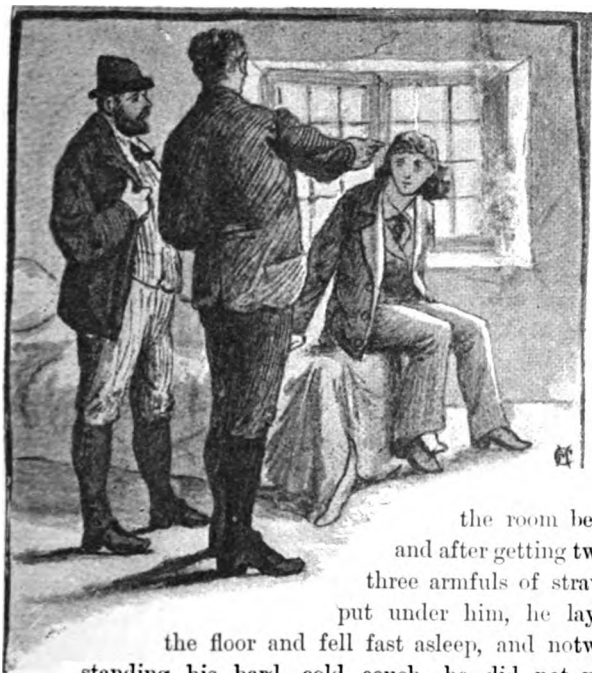
And while the girl begged him to release her and struggled to get free, he retained hold of her wrist, and stood stock-still in what would, had it been light enough to see them, have been a most amusing attitude of perplexity. He was proud of having caught his first poacher, but he felt that if he let his prisoner go, Quadling would never believe the queer story he would have to tell, and would fancy he had been dreaming or romancing. So he determined to stick to his capture until he had produced her to Quadling, and he told her so. Entreaties failing, she tried blandishments, but Peter was inexorable. Fortunately, the darkness of the night and her man's dress made it easier for him, as he could not see and be persuaded by the pretty face. So he marched her along until they came to the cottage, and then he perceived by the lights being out that Quadling and his wife were abed.

"Oh, don't wake him!" Susie cried. "He will be so cross, and will be sure to send me to gaol. Please wait until the morning before you tell him."

"Well, perhaps it will be best for you if we don't wake him

now, but I won't let you go I will shut you up until the morning."

He took her upstairs to his room, and told her she might lie on his bed and rest He then locked her in, and descended to



the room below, and after getting two or three armfuls of straw to put under him, he lay on the floor and fell fast asleep, and notwithstanding his hard, cold couch, he did not wake until he was shaken by Quadling in the morning.

"Whatever have you been up to, lad? Not been getting drunk, surelie?"

"Not likely. I don't drink," replied Peter, curtly, rubbing his eyes, and still only half awake.

"Well, why be on the floor when you have a comfortable bed upstairs?" queried the keeper, much surprised.

"Oh, now I remember. I've got a bird upstairs. Caught such a poacher as you never saw before, sir. Just walk up and see." And they went up the stairs, and unlocked the door.

There, sitting up on the bed, was Susie Saunders in the attire of a smack's boy, her short hair ruffled, and her rosy but somewhat dirty face smeared with tears. She stared at the two keepers' but said nothing while Peter explained her presence there.

"Well done, my lad. I'm sorry I spoke so roughly just now ; but I could not make it out. Well, this is a go, and no mistake ! Run home to your granny, girl. We'll think how to punish you by-and-bye."

"I can't go home by daylight in this dress, Mr. Quadling," pleaded the girl.

"The missis will lend you a cloak. Come, off you go." And the hussy ran downstairs and went in to Mrs. Quadling, who rated her soundly, but lent her a cloak to cover her.

"We will talk over what we shall do to-night, Peter lad, for I'm blowed if I know. Go and get your breakfast, for the company will be here by nine o'clock, and it's now eight. This is the rummiest go I ever did see."



CHAPTER IX.

A merry party—Rabbit-shooting—The London young gentlemen—The burst gun—A man lost.

IT was a merry party which assembled in the front garden of the keeper's cottage. It was composed of farmers and their sons and friends, with a tradesman friend or two of Quadling's from Crostwich, and a couple of young London clerks, who were the guests of one of the farmers. Quadling and Peter were to shoot, as well as the visitors, and it was understood that all the rabbits killed were to be the property of the keeper, who would present a sufficient number to each visitor, and retain the rest. The object of the meeting was, of course, to thin the rabbits out, and at the same time to give a little sport to the neighbours and tenants on the estate. The number of rabbits killed and distributed, and the value of those sold, were all strictly accounted for at the Hall; but it was looked upon as the keeper's day, as the invitations were left entirely to him, and no guest at the Hall was present or interfered. The "tips," of course, amounted to two or three pounds, or perhaps more, and the under-keeper was entitled to a third of these, the head keeper getting two-thirds.

A drizzling rain made the day anything but pleasant; but every one was well clad (except the Londoners, whose boots were not sufficiently thick), and fair weather or foul made but little difference to them. As all had breakfasted pretty early, it was necessary to take a little refreshment in the way of beer, and the

tall Londoner brought out a large whisky-flask, which caused Quadling to give him a good-natured reproof, which, however, the young fellow did not like. A good deal of joking and laughing was going on, and it was very clear that every one was bent on amusing himself to the utmost.

"Now, gentlemen, are you all ready?" cried Quadling. "If so, we will start at once. Now, shoot all the rabbits you can, but let hares and winged game alone. Now we will draw lots for places, number one to take the left, and the following numbers to range to the right."

Numbers, previously written on folded slips of paper, were drawn out of a hat, and number one took up his station to the extreme left, on the edge of the wood, and the others were placed at regular intervals between him and the lake, generally about twenty yards apart. Almost every man had a dog of some kind, and when the word was given to move, a perfect Babel arose, which started everything in front of them. Any unlucky rabbit which tried to double back was pretty sure to be chopped up by a dog. Peter was about the middle of the line, and had for his right-hand neighbour the short Londoner. It was a treat to Peter to be able to shoot as much as he liked, and snap-shooting at rabbits had been his great holiday enjoyment. He was a pretty good and quick shot, too, and few rabbits which came in his way escaped him. The case with his neighbour was very different. He would poke his gun at a rabbit and follow it, hesitating to pull the trigger until the rabbit had either got out of reach or been killed by the gun on either side, and then his gun would go off in a very aimless fashion.

"You are as bad a shot as the Frenchman," said Peter to himself; "but you hold your tongue and don't brag, so that I don't mind you."

The strong countrymen, accustomed to such things, crashed sturdily through the opposing brambles and bushes; but to the short Londoner, it was hard work, and, although he made game

efforts to keep up to the line, it was almost too much for him. Peter was about to advise him to leave his station, and endeavour to exchange with a man who was walking along a drive, when his shooting was put a speedy end to. A rabbit got up in front of him, and bolted into a half-formed burrow, where its hind legs were visible as it struggled to penetrate farther. The short Londoner evidently thought that now was his chance of getting a safe shot, and, running up, he placed the muzzle of his gun *inside the hole*, and pulled the trigger. The result was alarming. There was a deafening explosion, and a cloud of smoke; and, on Peter running up, he saw the little man sitting on the ground, and gazing at the pieces of the burst gun.

"Are you hurt?" asked Peter, anxiously; but he was too bewildered to reply.

Peter examined him all over, and found that, fortunately, he had neither scratch nor bruise.

"I'm all right, I think, only my ears are singing like they do when you go down in a diving-bell at the Polytechnic. I say! don't make a fuss. I'll just go quietly back to the cottage and sit down, and if any one asks after me, say I was wet and went home. It isn't worth while to make the others anxious and spoil their sport. But keep your eye on my friend, if you can. He can't shoot any more than I can, and he has that whisky-flask with him, which he thinks it swell to drink out of on such an occasion, and he can't stand whisky any better than he can shoot."

Peter promised to do what he could, and the little man trudged back through the bushes, which held so much wet, and dispersed it in such large drops, that his cloth suit was wet through in no time.

The shooting was going on vigorously enough. Every minute somebody got a shot, and sometimes there were two or three together, Peter killing his share. In this way, with many shouts and laughter, the party scoured the length and breadth of the wood, each man of course carrying his own spoils. When the

end of the wood was reached, they collected to compare notes and report themselves, and the wood was then left to the quiet and loneliness which would characterize it until the return of spring sent the wildfowl to their breeding-stations in the far north.

"Mr. Quadling," said Peter, "the noise we made in the wood was so great that the rabbits trotted before we got another shot at them. Couldn't one divide the party into two, and beat the wood on the other side from each end to the middle at the same time?"

"A good idea, Peter; but pray, gentlemen, be careful in your shooting as the parties near each other."

The plan suggested by Peter was carried out. The tall Londoner was drafted off to the other party, so Peter could not keep his eye upon him, but he noticed before they started that he was very glum, and drank a good deal of the beer that was freely handed round. His face had also been scratched by a branch flying back into it. The fresh beat afforded capital sport, as, hearing their enemies approaching from both ends, the rabbits were bewildered. The shooting, however, was falling off in effectiveness, as the rain was persistent and the going fatiguing. When the parties met, the tall Londoner was not visible.

"Where is your friend?" Peter asked of young Knox, the farmer, whose guest the strangers were.

"Oh, do you mean Bell, the tall one, or Gray, the short one?"

"Mr. Bell; the other went back some time ago."

"Bell has also gone home, no doubt. He is engaged to my sister, and I expect he would rather be with her than out on such a day as this."

After an interval for lunch the party shot over the fields surrounding the woods, and when these were finished it was well on in the afternoon, and raining harder than ever, so it was agreed to give up the sport. They all returned, carrying their rabbits to the cottage, and the spoils of the day were laid out in a barn and equitably divided. There was then a further quantity of beer

drunk, toasts proposed and acknowledged, sundry little transfers of cash from the departing guests to the keepers, and the business of the day was over.

After the necessary cleaning of the guns was over, Peter and Quadling changed their clothes, and sat down to their tea tired and hungry. Scarcely had they commenced when there was a knock at the door, and on its being opened Mr. Knox, Miss Knox, and Mr. Gray walked in.

"Halloa! what's the matter?" exclaimed Quadling, seeing trouble in their faces.

"Mr. Bell has not returned. We fear some accident must have happened to him."



CHAPTER X.

The search through the wood—A nasty night—The whisky-flask—The drinker found in a net—The broken engagement—Mr. Knox—Destroying the poaching cats.

“**T**HEN we must go out and look for him. It isn't a night for any man to be left out in if anything has happened to him. Go and look up the lanterns, Peter,” said Quadling.

Peter thrust a hunch of bread into his pocket, for he was very hungry, and went out to fetch all the available lanterns. He returned with three ready lit.

“Who last saw Mr. Bell?” asked Quadling.

“He came with us to beat the second wood, and he was placed on my left, somewhere between me and the lake, and then I missed him, and supposed he had got tired and returned home.”

“Then we will try that wood first, and take Jock and Kelpie with us.”

Jock was a Newfoundland, and Kelpie a spaniel, both clever dogs of their kind. The little party left the cottage, and set out on their quest in great anxiety. The night was dark and wet, and very cheerless was the prospect of a wet tramp through the lonely wood.

“You go back, Anna,” said Mr. Knox.

“No, I shall not,” replied the brave girl.

Peter noted her firm, lissom figure, and the pluck with which she pushed through the undergrowth, and wondered how on earth she could have fancied a man of Mr. Bell's appearance and stamina. As they reached the head of the lake, Quadling told Peter to take the edge of the water, as his height gave him an



THE SEARCH.

advantage among the reeds, and the others walked in a line with him higher up.

As Peter went splashing along in a zigzag fashion, scrutinizing every bit of cover with the aid of his lantern, he was joined by Miss Knox, who tramped over the soft, boggy soil, often sinking over her ankles in the mud, without any hesitation.

"What do you think can have happened to Mr. Bell?" she

said. "Do you think he has fallen into the water, or shot himself?"

"Neither, I hope, Miss Knox. The water is so shallow at the edge that he could not get drowned, and he could scarcely have met with a gun accident without attracting some attention at the time. He may have been dead tired and fallen asleep."

"Oh, he is not such a baby as that," replied the young lady, rather indignantly.

She remembered her *fiancé's* activity in waltzing, which had won her heart, and she was ready to endow him with other virtues. Peter remembered the big whisky-flask, and had his own idea of what had happened; but he dared not hint this.

So they went on, calling out continuously, and listening for a reply or a groan. The dogs hunted to and fro, in great excitement at the unusual proceedings, and evidently with a consciousness that something was being searched for. The thorough disturbance the wood had had during the day rendered it quieter now. The birds and the animals had not come back to their haunts, and it was free from the usual noises of the night, so that there was a strong and eerie feeling of desolation. Beyond the sound of their own progress, their calls, and the steady sough of the rain, there was no sound. Suddenly the spaniel bounded up to Quadling with some object in its mouth.

It was a hat—the hat of the missing man. The others, summoned by his whistle, came up, and followed the intelligent dog to the place where it had found the hat; and then both dogs appeared to catch the scent, although with difficulty, and in a hesitating fashion led them a little farther. Here Miss Knox saw something on the ground reflecting the glitter of the lamps. It was the flask. Being a practical young woman, she lifted it to her nose, and thus ascertained what the contents had been; and Peter, who was watching her somewhat curiously, saw her bite her lip and frown. The dogs next led them to one of the traverses of a pipe of the decoy.

"Ah! now, this is a likely place for the poor young fellow to have come on unawares and tumbled down," said Quadling, as he jumped down.

The rest followed his example, and proceeding along the traverse, reached the pipe. There was a big rent in the netting. It looked as if some one had fallen against it, and as it was rotten it had given way.

Peter jumped through the hole, and proceeded to wade down the pipe to the mouth, for he had no doubt that it was here Mr Bell would be found. He came to the mouth of the pipe without seeing anything, and waded out into the bay until he was up to his armpits, when Quadling called him back, and requested him to search up the pipe again. The dogs were now useless, as the water had destroyed all the scent. Peter accordingly retraced his steps, and walked up the interior of the pipe, while the others accompanied him outside. When the pipe grew so low that Peter had to crouch, young Knox ran on ahead, and shouted out,

"Here he is, at the end of the pipe!"

And there the poor fellow was, lying down on his face right at the end of the pipe, where he could only have got upon his hands and knees. Fortunately there was no water so far up, or he would have been drowned, as his face was buried in the moss.

They pulled the net off and got him out. He was wet through, minus hat and gun, his coat torn, and he was insensible, the latter state most unmistakeably produced by drink.

There was very little conversation exchanged as they took him home. They improvised a litter out of a couple of rails, with a section of reed fence thrown across, and two of the men carried him along the glades. When they got him into the cottage, they soon saw that he had sustained no injury save such as he might afterwards feel from the exposure, and that he could only be left to sleep off his unhappy excess.

"Mrs. Quadling, can you take care of him?" asked Miss Knox.

"Certainly, miss."

"Oh, no, we will drive him home by-and-bye," exclaimed Knox.

"You will do nothing of the kind. He shall not come inside my doors again. When he comes to himself, Mr. Quadling, you can give him these," said the indignant young lady, taking a ring off her finger, and a locket and chain off her neck, and laying them on the table.

No one made any reply, but Mr. Gray said meekly but pluckily,

"I will stay here and see to my friend."

"They can have my room, Mrs. Quadling," said Peter.

"And will you sleep on the floor like you did last night, young man?" asked Mrs. Quadling, crossly.

"If you are short of room, Penniless shall come with us," said Knox, and so it fell out that Peter presently found himself sitting at supper with Mr. Knox and his sister, in a suit of clothes too small for him, and borrowed from his host, and enjoying what is a friend of mine's notion of the best *scenery*—a good square meal.

Miss Knox soon retired, shaking hands with Peter, and thanking him for his exertions. Peter, being young, and not very wise in such matters, thought he would make an effort at peacemaking. So he said, blushing violently the while,

"I think, Miss Knox, Mr. Bell's indiscretion was in a great measure accidental. He was——"

"Hold your tongue, sir," exclaimed the young lady, tartly, and swept out of the room.

Mr. Knox laughed at Peter's discomfiture. "Let her alone. I am not sorry the affair is off; it was very unsuitable. Draw your chair up to the fire, and let us have a chat."

And they had a long chat, chiefly about sport and farming. Peter asked so many questions on the latter topic, that Knox wanted to know the reason why; and on Peter showing a reluctance to answer him, he said,

"I say, Penniless, were you brought up with the intention of being a keeper?"

"Well, not quite."

"What on earth made you take to it, then? We can all see that you are good enough for something else."

"What would you do, Mr. Knox, if you were left without a relative or a friend, without any means of getting a living, and knew that you had wasted all your opportunities of education? Suppose it was a choice between taking to an occupation you knew something of and liked, or enlisting: what would you do?"

"By Jove! Hang it all! Is that how the land lies?"

"Yes, but pray don't put it into Mr. Quadling's head. I got off my guard in talking to you, but I am on my guard with him, and although he is as good-hearted a chap as you would meet in any station, he is as simple as possible in some things."

"I'll keep dark as long as it suits you to be what you are, but, depend on it, I'm your friend whenever you want one, and if a little money—well, if that's a delicate subject I'll drop it for the present; but if I can help——"

"If you see me watching your farming operations closely, don't be vexed with me, and think I'm suspicious of poachers," interrupted Peter, "and I shall be much obliged to you."

When Peter got back to the cottage next morning he found old Granny Saunders and Susie in the kitchen, and Quadling holding forth to them on the enormity of their crime. The latter declined to say what he would do until noon. In the meantime he went up to the Hall to see Mrs. Spencer, who was of course extremely loth to prosecute a woman for poaching. She, however, left the matter in her keeper's hands, and Quadling proceeded to sit in the judgment-seat. He threatened to send the "baggage" to gaol unless they consented to let him destroy the six poaching cats. He was obdurate to all entreaties, and sternly gave them the alternative—gaol or destruction of the cats. They were obliged to consent, and taking a rabbit-hutch down to their home on a wheelbarrow, all the six cats were forced into it and carried off. As Peter wheeled the squalling freight along the road he was followed by a small army of delighted boys, amused

men, and angry matrons, but he got his charges home in safety, and placed them in an outhouse. Then came the question, how should they be destroyed? They consulted the doctor of the village, who, as a naturalist, was indebted to the keeper for sundry specimens of birds at odd times, and he undertook to administer prussic acid. A feather dipped in the poison, and tied to the end of a stick, was shoved through the bars of the hutch into the mouths of the cats, and in an instant and without pain they were as "dead as a door-nail."

Peter was allowed to have the skins with which to make a rug, in commemoration of his first poacher.

During the afternoon the two unlucky gentlemen departed to Crostwich, and also take their departure out of this history.



CHAPTER XI.

Slaughtering the pike—Trimmers and liggers—Catching bait—Setting the trimmers—Plenty of pike, and a big one—The joys of a keeper's life.

PETER'S mind was now bent on the slaughter of the pike on Saturday, at which Gerard, Mr. Knox, and three or four others were to assist. Peter overhauled Quadling's implements of destruction, and found two score of the ordinary wood trimmers, with hooks and lines. He did not consider these enough for the purpose, so he proceeded to make a number of "liggers," as used in the adjacent Broad district. A bundle of dry reeds, as long and as thick as the forearm of a man, is cut, and the ends tightly bound with string, and the ligger is complete. It floats well, and does not frighten the fish. The line is wound round it, and secured by a half-hitch, which the run of a pike dislodges, thus permitting the spare line to run out. It did not take Peter very long to make fifty of these rough-and-ready contrivances, but when he had made them he was rather nonplussed to find that Quadling had not a sufficient store of double hooks and lines. The village shop, however, afforded plenty of single eel-hooks and string, and the keeper's lumber-room produced a quantity of soft copper wire in the form of rabbit and hare snares confiscated from poachers. It was an easy matter to whip a couple of eel-hooks back to back, and mount them on a short length of wire.

"Now, how shall we get some bait, Mr. Quadling? Have you a casting-net?"

"No, but somewhere about there is a fine-meshed drag-net we took from some poachers in the trout stream. If you can find that it will do capitally"

After some search Peter found it, and carrying it and a couple of large watering-cans down to the lake, he proceeded to catch the bait. He chose one of the shallow bays in front of a decoy-pipe, and pegging one end of his net to the bank, he rowed out with the other in a circle, and so enclosed a small segment of the bay. He was alone, as Mr. Quadling was busy repairing the decoy-pipes, and thus could not do the netting so effectually as if he had had assistance. At the first haul, however, he felt that there were fish in the net, and, sure enough, there were a score of small roach, just the thing for bait, several larger fish, and a pike of about four pounds which was summarily knocked, on the head. Half-a-dozen draws in this way provided Peter with at least a hundred nice-sized bait. These were placed in the cans, and after tying pieces of canvas over the open part, the cans were left in the water to keep the bait fresh.

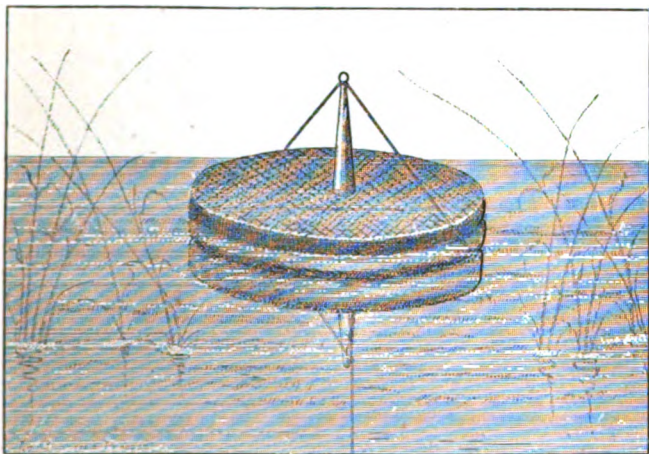
After the netting was over Peter had to work hard at the pipes, assisting Quadling, and directing some men who were placing the galvanized wire netting over one of the pipes.

"That was the queerest bird, yesterday, that I ever caught in a decoy," said the keeper, referring to the unfortunate Mr. Bell. "What a thing drink is when it gets into a man! Never you take to it, my lad. Good ale doesn't hurt one in moderation, but I don't hold with spirits, except in the cold north. I have a brother in Scotland, and he says they can drink nothing but whisky there, and they can't do without it; but in these parts there is nothing like sound home-brewed beer to keep a man healthy, and fit for the hard work of a keeper's life."

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Quadling."

"Ay, ay, but what I'm hinting at is this. If it be a hard winter, it will be cruel work clearing these pipes of the ice at night, and 'coy men are too ready at taking a nip to keep the cold out. But it don't warm them really, not a bit. So don't you take to it, Peter. Well, it is getting dark. We must shut up work, and go in to tea."

After the tea, always a very cheerful and pleasant meal at the keeper's cottage, Peter sallied out to set as many of the trimmers as he could overnight. He had not had time to do so during the day, so, taking a couple of lanterns, he got into the boat, hauled out his can of bait, and proceeded to thread the hooks under the skin with a baiting-needle. This is not a pleasant operation at

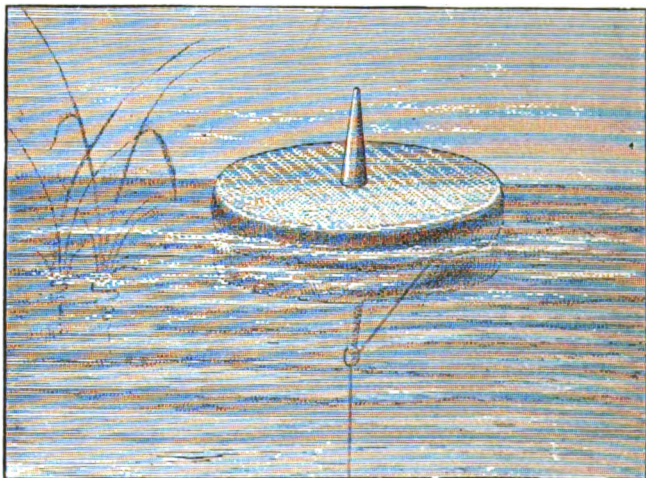


TRIMMER SET.

any time, and when one has to do it by the uncertain light of a flickering candle, it takes a considerable time to bait forty hooks. The needle is inserted in the skin of the roach or dace just behind the gills, and thrust under the skin to behind the dorsal fin, and the hook and wire drawn after it, so that the hook lies flat against the shoulder. After each fish was so treated it was laid in a separate can, and then, when all the hooks he intended to use were so baited, Peter proceeded to set the wooden trimmers along the edge of the weeds in the decoy bays. Fastening a baited hook to the line, and allowing about two feet of it to dangle below the

trimmer, he placed the latter carefully, white side up, in the water, and then rowed a little farther, and set another one.

Probably many of my readers may be familiar with the appearance of those engines of destruction called "trimmers," but if they are not, it may be well to say that they are flat circular pieces of wood four or five inches in diameter and three-quarters of an inch thick. A groove is made all round the circumference, in which the line is wound, and a peg is thrust through a hole in



TRIMMER REVERSED.

the centre. The line is passed through a notch in the edge and in a slit at the top of the stick, and hangs down from the opposite side of the trimmer. When a pike seizes the bait he turns the trimmer over, and the line is freed to run out, while the underside of the trimmer being painted red and the upper white, the fact of a run is indicated by the change of colour. Of course, where pike are pursued for sport, the use of the trimmer is justly tabooed as destructive and unsportsmanlike; but where the pike must be kept under, and the use of the rod is not practicable, as

it is not in a decoy, the trimmer is a valuable, if not the only, means of slaying the pike.

By the time Peter had set the forty wooden trimmers he had had enough of the job, and prepared to return. Happening to place both lanterns together in the bow of the boat while taking his temporary mooring-pole out of the mud, he noticed that the light made the bottom plainly visible, and then he caught sight of a large pike lying quite still, and apparently gazing at the light.

"By Jove!" thought Peter, "that suggests something. Have I not heard of spearing fish at night, using a light to make them visible? If I can get or make a spear, I'll try that dodge against the pike before very long." And as Peter generally managed to carry out his intentions, we shall probably have to chronicle a night's pike-spearing. But I am anticipating.

Peter, having left everything ready for the morrow, went home (the cottage was already home to him), and, after reading a little in his own little bed-room, turned in early. He was up at three o'clock to go his rounds, and on coming back at six o'clock he saw Gerard at the gate, just dismounting from his bicycle.

"Why, old fellow, you are early."

"Yes, Peter, I thought you might want some help at the trimmering. Have you set any?"

"I set forty last night; and as I came back by the decoy, I could just make out that several of them are red side up, and one I saw being towed at a rapid pace along the water, so I expect there is a good one there. Come in and have some breakfast."

The lads were soon sitting down before two mighty bowls of bread and milk, than which nothing makes a better foundation for the day's work.

"I say, Gerard, there is a lot to do at the pipes, and I should like to go on with it, if you would take the boy Tim" (son of a watcher), "and set the fifty liggers. There is a capital breeze

springing up, and if you set them all across the middle of the lake, and let them drift down into the decoys, I think it will be best. After that is done, we must get some more bait to re-set those that are taken. Mr. Knox and the others won't be here until eleven, so there is plenty of time."

Gerard readily agreed to this, and he was not long before he was engaged in setting the liggers across the lake as directed. Peter went to work with a will at the pipe where the wire netting was being set up, and there Quadling was pleased to find him.

"If, when they come, you will take charge of one boat and your brother of the other, I need not trouble myself, for I can't very well spare the time," said Quadling.

Gerard was just rowing back after setting his liggers, when Mr. Knox and three other persons came up.

"I say, Peter, almost every trimmer is red side up," he called out. "We shall have no end of fun."

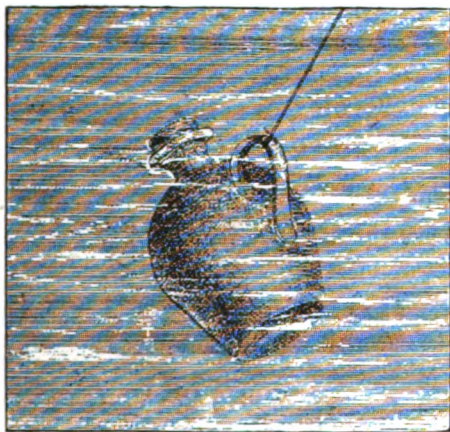
Dividing the party equally, the two boats pulled out, agreeing to take up the wooden trimmers only at first, as they had been out all night. They raced for the first red one, and Gerard's crew succeeded in getting hold of it first; but, being in too much of a hurry to haul the fish in, the pike—a very large one—managed to escape, and sounds of lamentation arose.

In the meantime, Peter's crew had hold of another trimmer, and, with a little careful handling, a nice pike, of seven pounds weight, was landed.

It does not do to haul a pike by main force into a boat, although it be at the end of a strong trimmer-line. Unless the fish has tired itself out by swimming about for some hours trying to get rid of the hook, it may easily free itself by a convulsive struggle at the last moment. If you find that you have a large one on, you must give and take, just as if you were playing it with the end of a rod, and avoid any sudden jerks.

It was a bright, fresh, breezy morning; the wavelets danced merrily in the sun, and splashed loudly amid the waving reeds

on the leeward margin. It was most enjoyable being on the water on such a day, and, as the pike had evidently been well on the feed during the night, there was plenty of excitement. Time after time the boats would race up to a red trimmer, almost upsetting each other and themselves in the fun of the moment. Fish after fish was hauled in, and knocked on the head; many of them running up to fifteen pounds in weight. Nor were practical jokes wanting to add to the fun: for instance, Peter picked



"HERE IS A MONSTER."

up a trimmer, from which bait and hook had disappeared, and, as the attention of his companion was absorbed in watching Gerard's boat playing a very heavy fish, he tied the line to the handle of the inevitable stone jar of ale which had been brought with them, and dropped it overboard. He then went in pursuit of another trimmer, and had the satisfaction of seeing Gerard making for the one he had just left.

"Here is a monster," cried Gerard; "the biggest yet! Oh, how he pulls! I can hardly hold him. Here he comes! Why, what on earth is it?" And, amid a roar of laughter, he landed the beer-jug.

Of the forty trimmers which had been set, thirty-five had been

struck, and thirty fish were secured. Ten of them were under two pounds weight each, and fit only to be destroyed, but twenty ran from four pounds to nineteen, and when they were thrown in a heap on the bank, they made a pretty sight.

It was now necessary to catch some more bait, and the drag net was brought into requisition—a single draw of it producing a sufficient number of small roach. The trimmers were then re-baited and set at the upper end of the lake, and after this was done, the boats proceeded to take up the fifty reed-liggers which had been set in the morning. A curious incident now occurred. Each boat took hold of a ligger, and proceeded to haul in the line, at the end of which it was evident there was a good fish. But the boats were drawing closer to each other, and seemed to be pulling at the same object.

"The pike have entangled the lines," said Peter; but, as the fish came in sight, it was apparent that there was only one, and that a very large one.

"He has swallowed both baits," cried Knox. "Now, whose fish shall he be? Let us see which can pull the hardest."

"No, no, we shall lose him. Let us toss up for him." And the throw of a penny decided that Gerard was to have the fish. It was not an easy task to get the monster on board, and when it was subsequently weighed, it was found to turn the scale at twenty-five pounds.

Fifteen fish were the result of the fifty liggers. If they had been set overnight, the number would probably have been doubled. After this they went back to the cottage for a bread-and-cheese lunch and a rest, and at three o'clock went to take up all the trimmers and liggers. It was difficult to find them all. Some had, perhaps, been carried under weeds by the fish, and a few others were not found for two or three days after; but, with these exceptions, all were taken up, and ten more fish were added to the score. When the result of the day's slaughter was laid out on the mossy sward in the dusk, they formed a goodly

row of fifty-five fish, of an average weight of five pounds, and a total weight of two hundred and seventy-five pounds, nearly two hundredweight and a half.

"There, Mr. Quadling," said Peter. "Don't you call that slaughter, and won't your ducks be all the quieter for it?"

"Ay, ay; but the worst of it is that there are so many pike that it would take a month of such days to see them as scanty as I should like. I'll send that big one up to the Hall, and when you gentlemen have chosen what you wish for yourselves and your friends, we will take the rest to the village, and give them to the poor people for their Sunday's dinner."

Peter and Gerard wheeled a goodly barrow-load into the village, and taking up their stand on the green, a few loud cries, bellman fashion, brought the people around them; and the fish quickly disappeared, a good bit of fun being made out of the transaction. Peter gave two of the best to Susie Saunders, but her grandmother was so sore about the loss of her cats, that she would not accept them, and sent them back.

"I tell you what, Peter. You seem to have had plenty of fun in a short time. If a keeper's life is like this always, it must be a very pleasant life."

"It is a pleasant life, Jerry. It is glorious being out all day, and can't one sleep at night! By the way, I haven't finished your hammock yet, and you must take my bed, and I will make up a straw one. You have no idea how luxurious a straw bed is."

Gerard had arranged to stay the night, and spend the Sunday with his brother. He was up early on Sunday morning, and went the rounds with Peter, and they both of them went to church in the afternoon, spending a very happy Sunday.

Quadling imparted to his wife his belief that both the lads had plenty of "grit," and as long as the younger one did not make the elder idle—and there did not seem to be much chance of that—he might come as often as he liked, and stay as long as he liked. It was as good as having two under-keepers.

CHAPTER XII.

A moonlight night—Poachers in the warren—A friendly ass—The surprise—In the same boat with a poacher—A hard crack on the head—The conviction.

AFTER the day at the pike, the lake was suffered to revert to its usual winter's quiet and loneliness. No one went near it in the daytime, except at the end farthest from the decoys, and by making use of the traverses, along which one could creep to the pipes. The decoy ducks were daily fed at noon. A low whistle, or the appearance of the dog, was sufficient to make them swim towards the entrance of the pipe to take the feed-corn which was scattered there for them. The decoy dog, which was a small liver-coloured spaniel, was daily put through its exercise, jumping over the dog-jumps into the pipe and back again, and so proceeding up the pipe, without uttering a sound or looking towards the ducks on the lake.

There was plenty to do each day, and a week or two slipped quietly away, without any incident occurring worth describing.

One moonlight night Peter left the cottage after his supper, and was proceeding to his own door just round the corner, when the extreme beauty of the night tempted him to stroll a little farther. It was brilliantly light, and objects could be discerned at a considerable distance, while the air was balmy and soft to a degree unusual for a night in the beginning of November. Peter continued his stroll until he came to the top of a slight elevation which commanded a view of the harbour. So still was it that

the sound of oars caught his ear, and looking intently, he saw a boat pass out from between the piers and proceed to the southward, its course being plainly marked by the splashes of water from the oars glistening in the moonlight. He wondered what business the boat could have going out at this time of night, and watched it with some curiosity. It hugged the shore until it came opposite the warren, and, Peter's suspicion being aroused, he climbed a tree to get a better view. From there he could see right over the village, and presently distinguished the boat come to the beach, where it was met by a small group of men. The combined group then entered the warren, among the hillocks of which they disappeared. Peter ran back to the cottage, and told the keeper what he had seen.

"It's light enough for them to see to ferret the holes, and that is what they are after, depend upon it. Now, what had we better do to catch them? They will be sure to have a watch set."

"Shall I go to the village and get the policeman to help us?" asked Peter.

"No, we can't trust him. He may give a signal and set them off. We must work craftily, or we shan't get a sight of them. Do you think you could creep along by the shore while I go through the fir planting, and sneak into the back of the warren? Very well. Keep your eyes open, and try to recognize them; but don't lay hold of any one unless he is alone, and you are sure you can master him. Now take your stick and be off."

Peter stole down along the hedge-sides until he came to a tidal creek. In the bed of this, as the tide was out, he could creep unseen close to the beach, but, when there, he could see no cover at all which he could avail himself of, while the boat and the warren were half a mile farther on. He knew that if he attempted to pass along the beach he would be seen directly, and the boat would be taken, and he was at his wits' end how to proceed. Just then his eye fell upon a donkey grazing on the bank of the creek. A feasible plan occurred to him at once, and,

quietly stepping up to the donkey, he coolly took possession of it. Throwing one arm over its neck, he bowed his long back until he was hidden behind the donkey, and keeping the beast between him and the sand-hills, he proceeded to make his stalk. He was not afraid of his body being seen, but he thought his legs might be visible, so he carefully went along the dark strip of seaweed that fringed the limit of the tide. So he crept on, the donkey walking in the quietest and most accommodating manner. His back began to ache dreadfully, and the distance seemed interminable. As he drew near to the boat, he saw that no one was in charge of it, the whole party being in the warren. If any one were on the look-out on the beach side, they probably thought the donkey was straying. At all events no notice was taken, and Peter was now opposite the boat, and within a yard of it. Letting go the donkey, he rolled on board, and lay down with his head level with the gunwale.

The shining waves lapped musically against the boat, and toyed lightly with the shingle; but, with the exception of such slight sounds, the whole curve of the bay was as quiet as possible; and so beautiful was the night, and so restful the effect, that it seemed impossible that lawlessness was abroad and at work. Suddenly the stillness was broken by the cry of a gull.

"That sounded very artificial," thought Peter. "I wonder if it was a signal."

Then a loud whistle, which he knew by the tone of it was Quadling's, rent the air, and Peter stood up and shoved the boat a little way off with an oar. A flying figure came down the beach, and called out,

"Let me get in, you—— The keepers are after us. I believe you was a-going to slope without us. Now never mind the others; they will be nabbed. Just you row your very hardest, and let us get into the harbour before the keepers can come up."

The man was the gipsy whom Peter had seen before, and he evidently took Peter for a confederate. So bent was he on



STALKING THE POACHERS.

escaping, that he seized the stroke oar, and set to work vigorously, never once looking behind him, and keeping up a running fire of curses and strong language generally. Peter was naturally in a



"THE KEEPER'S ARE AFTER US."

high state of excitement, but was wise enough to hold his tongue. Under their strong and urgent strokes the boat made rapid headway, while on the beach there were three or four running figures visible.

As they entered the harbour, Peter tried to direct the boat's

head to the southern side, where he hoped to have the assistance of the coastguard, but his companion swore at him, and said,—

“Make for the other side, you ——. Don’t you see that if we land here, we shall run into the hands of the —— curs? Beach her on the other side, and bolt.”

So Peter had to obey, but, just as they beached her, he took up his stretcher and struck the gipsy a terrific blow on the head, following it up as quick as lightning by another. Stunned for the moment, the man fell on his face in the stern, and Peter, pouncing on him, got his arms behind him, and lashed the wrists together, first with his braces, and then with a piece of spun-yarn which was lying in the boat. He then pushed the boat over, and in response to his cries of “Coastguard, ahoy!” two of the coastguardmen came running down. On his explaining the state of affairs to them, they promised to take charge of the gipsy, who was now coming to himself, while Peter went to look for Quadling. He met no one until he came to the spot where the ferreting had been going on, and there he saw Quadling sitting on the sand with a ferret in each hand, and evidently listening at a hole for a third.

“Is that you, Peter? Where have you been? They have all got away. I could not see the faces of any of them, but I’ve got the ferrets. Hand that bag over here, to put these brutes in. There’s another in the burrows. And look at the quantity of nets they have set.”

At least a score of draw-nets were set over the burrows, and half a dozen rabbits were kicking in them now. These Peter secured and killed, and took possession of the other nets, and a man’s coat which was lying by.

“Didn’t you see any of them, Peter?”

“Yes, I saw them running away, and I’ve got one of them—that big gipsy.”

“Eh, what? Are you speaking truly, lad?” exclaimed the keeper, in astonishment.

Peter explained his *ruse* and its success, to Quadling's great delight.

"That comes of having a head on one's shoulders. You have the making of a splendid keeper in you."

After waiting half an hour, they secured the third ferret, and then gathering up their trophies, they marched off to the coast-guard station. Here, in a little room, they found the prisoner, with his head bandaged, the two coastguardmen, and the policeman, who had no choice but to do his duty now.

As they entered the room, the gipsy said to Peter, with a number of adjectives which I omit,

"Look here, young man, that was a sharp trick to play on a fellow. I never had such a sell in my life. But I don't bear malice. You got the best of me in a way I admire. You ought to have been a gipsy. You are too clever for a keeper."

"I am obliged to you for the compliment. I am sorry I had to hit you so hard, but if I hadn't hit you, you would have hit me," said Peter.

"You are right there. I only wish I had had the first hit."

"I'm downright glad he didn't, Peter," observed Quadling.

After seeing the poacher in safe custody, the two keepers returned home in high spirits, and Peter at once went to bed. Quadling retailed the whole thing to his wife, and, to his perplexity, she said tartly,

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Quadling, to send a boy out alone in a boat on the ocean with a murderous poacher. If the boy had been killed, what would you have thought then?"

"Why, bless me, wife! I didn't send the boy out alone in a boat on the ocean. I hadn't a notion of such a thing. That was his own bright idea. I thought any tussle would come to my share, and that he was quite safe."

But Mrs. Quadling would not yield her opinion, and Quadling turned on the pillow and composed himself to sleep, with the conviction that women were curious creatures, and hard to understand.

In the morning they examined the ferrets, and three very good specimens they were.

"See, Peter, what cruel fellows they were. Here's one of the ferrets muzzled by having its lips sewn together. I do think that is a miserable way of treating a dumb creature, when it is so easy to muzzle them without hurting them, too. Just cut the thread while I hold the ferret."

The other two ferrets had little rings permanently fixed in the upper and lower lips, through which bits of thread could be rove when it was desired to muzzle them; but this is a plan which should not be adopted. As keeping and rearing ferrets was an amusement I was rather partial to as a boy, and as very little information is ascertainable from books—indeed, I do not know of any book professing to give full instructions as to the keeping and rearing of these useful animals—I propose, in the next chapter, to give such items of experience in this direction as Peter gathered while with Quadling.

The capture of the poacher necessitated the visit of both keepers to Crostwich to give evidence before the magistrates, and Peter was complimented by the bench on his ingenuity and courage. The gipsy got three months' imprisonment, and the troop to which he belonged took their departure from Wetacre in search of fresh fields and pastures new, and never made their reappearance.

While Peter was in Crostwich on this errand he wore his best keeper's dress, and looked very smart and handsome, but he carefully avoided going near Mr. Blackwood's school, and did not see Gerard at all. He knew that his brother's position was much higher than his own, and he did not wish to lower it in the eyes of the people of Crostwich, who, like the inhabitants of all small towns, were particularly censorious and fond of gossip and scandal. He was afraid of in any way interfering with Gerard's prospects, which he justly looked upon as much higher than his own, and he had already and intended always to resist Gerard's entreaties to come and pay him a visit.

CHAPTER XIII.

How to treat ferrets.

I REMEMBER when I was a youngster I was very fond of keeping ferrets, much to the disgust of my friends and relations, who thought them nasty creatures. So far from being nasty, they are the cleanest of animals, if they have proper attention paid to their necessities. My ferrets were as sweet and clean as it is possible for an animal to be, and were so tame, that I could fondle them like kittens, and permit them to run all over me.

The ferret is of the weasel tribe, and is generally white, save when it is the offspring or descendant of a cross between the wild polecat and the ordinary ferret. This cross is often resorted to under the impression that it makes the animal fiercer and more adapted for ratting; but I have had white ferrets as fierce and bloodthirsty as any brown ones, and there is this advantage about a white ferret, that it is the more easily recognized by the dogs, and not so liable to be snapped up under the impression that a rat or a rabbit is making a bolt of it.

The secret of successful ferret-keeping is to provide a roomy and dry abode for them. The usual boxes and hutches are most unsuitable, even if cleaned out every day. Quadling's ferrets were kept in a pigstye, cleaned out and devoted to the purpose, and no better place could be constructed. There was a little brick house, with an open walled-in space in front, which space

was paved with bricks, and had a decided slope. Inside the house were boxes, kept off the floor by loose bricks, and full of pine shavings, which are much better than straw, the resinous matter in them acting as an antiseptic and deterrent of vermin. The floor was sprinkled with pine sawdust for the same reason. Ferrets always go to the same corner to deposit their secretions, and, with a dozen ferrets in the sty, it was only necessary to clean up that corner twice a week, a supply of ashes, mixed with a little chloride of lime, being laid there each time. The general den was cleaned out once a week, and fresh sawdust and shavings substituted for the old litter. Around the open part of the sty, boards were fixed on the top of the wall, projecting about a foot inwards. This was to prevent any ferret climbing over the wall. Thus it will be seen that the ferrets had plenty of room to run about in, and when they are not in daily use, this is most important. If shut up too closely, they get weak and tender, and are particularly susceptible to cold.

Quadling or Peter, whenever they had occasion to go near the pen, used to handle the ferrets as much as possible, and rarely got bitten. A ferret will very soon get used to handling, and likes it; but you must always seize it boldly and without hesitation, for if you put out your hand and then withdraw it, and so on, after the manner of nervous people when dealing with them, they seem to take it as a challenge, and bite with great promptitude. And a ferret's bite is no joke. I have had a good many, and beyond the smart of the moment, which is pretty keen, I have experienced no ill effects; but to some people the bite is almost poisonous, and takes a long time to heal. The fewer bites you get the better, even if your flesh is healthy and heals rapidly, for, if the animal had been feeding on anything foul, blood poisoning might occur. If the ferret is at all inclined to bite, attract his attention in front with a glove, and bring the other hand with a rapid sweep behind him and grasp him firmly by the neck and shoulders. Mind you get your first hold correctly,

or, if you make a bungle of it, the ferret may teach you a lesson. I have seen one hang to a boy's finger, while the unlucky wight howled for pain, and could not shake his enemy off. Therefore, in handling a strange ferret, do so with a combination of caution, firmness, and quickness. I could get hold of my own ferrets anyhow, by the legs or tail or head, even when they were excited with following a rabbit, or after a bloody fight with a rat, and they would never offer to bite me. If a stranger offered to touch them, however, he had to be careful.

The male ferret is called the hob, and the female the jill. They breed generally twice a year, and the jill goes six weeks with young. As her time draws near, she should be placed in a separate hutch or box having two compartments, in the inner of which she can keep her young ones secluded from every eye. If any strange person goes to look at the jill at this time, particularly if the young ones are looked at, she will destroy her offspring,—a curious instinct which one can hardly suggest a reason for. Therefore it is best that the person she is used to should alone feed her. When the young ones begin to run about and feed themselves, the jill should be taken back to the general pen, and the young ones fed three times a day on bread and milk until they are three parts grown, when they can be added to the stock.

The usual food of ferrets should be bread and milk, with a good meal of meat once a week. There is nothing that strengthens and fattens ferrets better than the carcase of a cat, and whenever one was caught in a trap or shot, it was thrown to the ferrets. The latter have the greatest antipathy to live cats, a dislike which is fully returned.

If ferrets are kept in the manner indicated, they should be as sleek and clean as the tidiest of cats, free from odour and ticks, and should never be attacked with foot-rot. This is the great disease to which ferrets are liable, and it arises from want of cleanliness. The feet and claws break out into festering sores,

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which are aggravated by the dirt, and, if neglected, the poor animal will finally die. If one should be attacked, the first thing to do is to thoroughly cleanse its pen, and give it a wash with water in which threepennyworth of permanganate of potash has been dissolved. This is a capital disinfectant. Then the ferrets' feet must be well cleaned, and the sores dressed with a dilute solution of carbolic acid in water, repeated daily. This treatment, with plenty of clean sawdust—pine or fir, for choice—should speedily eradicate the disease. It is a good thing also to give them a run in long grass.

Another disease is something like distemper in dogs, and can only be cured by change and thorough cleansing, with good milk to drink and a little fresh-killed food each day, but not enough to let it gorge itself.

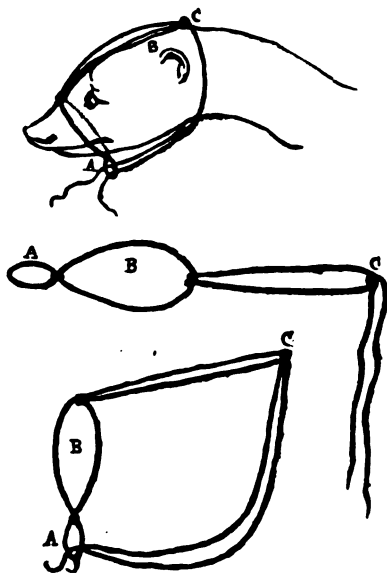
Fleas and ticks are most troublesome. There is one species of tick which is as large as a small pea, and clings so tightly to the head and neck that the ferret cannot dislodge it, and the keeper must tear it away. Keating's insect powder, rubbed into the coat and sprinkled about, and a wash with something bitter, such as a solution of quassia, will keep the insects away. But the ferrets should be continually examined to see that at least none of the large ticks have laid hold of them.

Young ferrets seem to take to their work very naturally, but it is a good plan to work an old one and a young one together. If a ferret is sluggish, or, on the other hand, too quick and impatient, get rid of it. If, on the contrary, it is plodding and active, a stickler at a scent, and altogether a businesslike creature, keep it and take care of it. All Quadling's ferrets had been originally taken from poachers, or were the offspring of captured ferrets, and, as no poacher would keep a bad ferret, his stock was a very good one, and those he bred were much sought after by neighbouring keepers. If any turned out bad, or unwilling workers, he had them destroyed at once.

To carry the ferrets to the field, he had sacks with the bottoms

formed of loosely-woven reed basket, which let in plenty of air, an important consideration, for ferrets are sometimes half suffocated and rendered disinclined to work by being shut up in bags. My own plan as a youngster was to carry them in a fishing-basket, notwithstanding their propensity to gnaw it.

All ferrets do not require muzzling when used for rabbiting. Even if they kill a rabbit in a burrow, they will not stay to eat part of it, but will at once leave it and go in quest of another. Others again, equally good hunters, will not leave a dead rabbit until they have gorged themselves and had their after-dinner sleep out, and such ferrets it is necessary to muzzle. I remember that I used to invest in wonderful muzzles when at school, but those I purchased would never act satisfactorily, and those we made with string were much better. There are two ways of muzzling a ferret with string, but the more humane and most effective method is this:—Take a



A FERRET'S MUZZLE.

piece of string and double it, as in the cut. Make a small loop, A, and a large loop, B; slip B over the ferret's mouth so as to confine both jaws, carry the doubled string up the centre of the forehead to the base of the head, and make a knot in it there (C). Then carry the loose ends round the neck, and tie them under

the chin ; then pass them through the small loop, A, which is dangling under the jaw ; draw tight and tie. Care must be taken not to hurt the ferret, as, if the string annoys him, he will do nothing but endeavour to get it off.

Of course you would never muzzle ferrets when ratting. They require all their teeth to face a big male rat at bay, and I have seen a large rat chase a small ferret across a barn ; and they often get severely punished by the teeth of the rats.

I do not like using a line with a ferret. There may be a root or stick in which the line may get entangled, and then you will have no end of trouble to get it out. Other items of ferret-lore will come on in the account of Peter's rabbiting in the warren and ratting at the farms, which came within his duties as game-keeper.



CHAPTER XIV.

Curling a dog's tail—Man-traps—Ferreting in the warren—Stoats—A sleepy couple.

SEEING Mr. Quadling coming along the drive, laughing quietly but heartily to himself, Peter asked him what the joke was.

"Why, Mrs. Spencer's lady's-maid took a pet pug dog to the groom to wash, and when the doggie was washed they found that his tail had gone quite straight, and his beauty was spoiled. So the young woman, she said, 'Whatever are we to do? I daren't let Mrs. Spencer see we've spoiled its tail.' Jim said to her, 'I reckon you'd better put its tail into curl-papers, miss;' and hang me if she didn't go and do it! You never saw a dog look so comical."

"I suppose its tail would have curled again naturally, wouldn't it?"

"Why, of course it would. I say, Peter, we must have a day at that warren now and then. When Mr. Spencer was alive he used to make a good bit of money out of it; but then we had a warrener especially to look after it. Mrs. Spencer doesn't care for the trouble of it, and we've done very little in the way of selling rabbits for some time."

"There ought to be all the more to catch, then," said Peter.

"No, there ain't,—it has been so poached, and I've not had

time to look much after it. I suppose I am growing old and lazy, and my last under-keeper was lazy and young. For an estate like this we are very short-handed, and if we went in for high preserving, we should want three times as many watchers as we have. I was thinking, too, that your brother would like the fun of a day's ferreting; so we might have it next Saturday, if you will write to him to come then."

"I really am very much obliged to you, Mr. Quadling," said Peter.

"Well, well. If you will get all the rabbit-nets together, and see that they are in working order, mending those that aren't, I'll be obliged to you."

Peter went indoors to write to Gerard, and to get the nets in order.

On the Saturday morning Gerard made his appearance by eight o'clock, and took a second breakfast, having had an appetizing ride on his bicycle from Crostwich. He was, however, very grumpy and short-tempered, and Peter asked him at last if he had got out of bed on the wrong side that morning.

"No; but I am vexed with you, Peter. I saw by the paper that you were in Crostwich the other day giving evidence in that poaching case, and I must say it was not nice of you to go away without seeing me."

Peter explained his reason very patiently; but Gerard's annoyance only disappeared when it became necessary to get the ferrets, dogs, and nets together, and make a start for the warren. They took a short cut across a spinney, and passed a large fir-tree, on the boughs of which were hung four or five iron things that looked like instruments of torture.

"What are those?" said Gerard.

"Man-traps," answered Peter.

The traps were precisely on the model of the ordinary spring rat-trap, but of such a size that if a man put his foot on the plate the jaws would catch him above the knee. Some of the jaws

were toothed, others were plain, but to be caught in them would mean severe injury.

"You don't mean to say that these traps are set for poachers?" said Gerard.

"Not now," answered Quadling; "it is not lawful to set them now, but I remember them being set. They were not much good, though. The regular poacher used to feel for them with a stick, and spring or break them. The only man I ever knew who was caught in one was a drunken mole-catcher, who had taken a short cut where he had no business to go. It was well for him that he had thick leggings on of thick leather, for he was not hurt much, but he was kept there all night. He made some awful groans and noises, but the only people who heard him, a labourer and his family, were too frightened to leave their cottage until it was daylight, to go and look what was the matter."

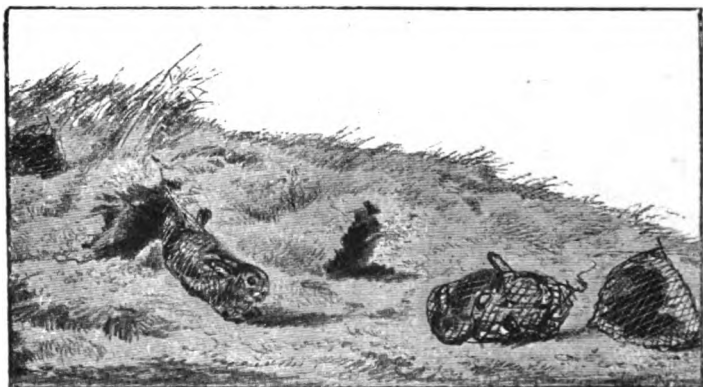
When they reached the warren, Quadling said,

"We will try the best lot of burrows first. I always like to make a good beginning."

So they walked half across the warren to a sand-hill which rose higher than its neighbours. It was perfectly riddled with burrows, which were chiefly at the base of it. Two idlers of the village had joined them, glad to have the chance of earning a couple of rabbits each. They had three dogs with them, two fox-terriers, and a lurcher which had been taken from a poacher. This was a remarkable dog. It would go trotting along as if nothing was farther from its thoughts than rabbits, and sidle up to a bush or tussock, on the other side of which a rabbit might be lying, and then slip round and pounce on the rabbit unexpectedly. It was amusing to watch it repeat this manoeuvre at every likely hiding-place on speculation, but it was extraordinary how often it would succeed in snapping up a rabbit. By reason of this accomplishment it was only taken out on special occasions.

The rabbit-nets were laid out and set, every one taking care to move as quietly as possible, not to alarm the rabbits inside, or

they will not bolt. I assume most of my readers are familiar with the usual form of rabbit-net used while ferreting, but for those who are not I may explain it is a bag net, with a string threaded through the meshes round the mouth. The end of this string is fastened to a peg, and this peg is thrust into the ground. The mouth of the net is then laid over the rabbit-hole, and kept in its place by tufts of grass or bits of earth. When the rabbit bolts into the net, it draws the string tight and closes the mouth;



FERRETING.

but you must take care to grab it at once, as it is likely to struggle free in a surprising manner.

Moving cautiously and quietly, they had soon set forty nets around the sand-hill, and, after arranging themselves around the hill, just above the burrows, two of the four ferrets they had brought with them were put in. They raced down the burrows, and, after a few moments only, there was a stamping and rumbling heard beneath, and the first rabbit went headlong into a net, breaking the string with the force of its velocity, and rolling over and over for yards. It would very likely have escaped if the

lurcher had not seized it. Then it seemed as if the hill exploded with rabbits. Out they came on all sides. Some missed the nets, where the latter were not well set, and escaped; but very nearly every net had a rabbit in it during the first ten minutes. Such a rush was quite unexpected, and it was more than the men and dogs could deal with. Gerard found himself, after a regular tumbling match, lying on the ground, with one rabbit under him, and one in each of his stretched-out hands. The others were too busy to come to his assistance, but the lurcher came quietly up and killed the rabbit in Gerard's right hand, and then that in his left hand, and Gerard himself managed to dispatch the one under him.

There was no time to re-set the nets, for as soon as a man could throw himself on a rabbit, extricate it from the net, and kill it, there was another at his feet needing the same operation. The dogs behaved with great knowingness. They never touched the rabbits safely in the nets, but confined themselves to those which were escaping. In a quarter of an hour the rush was over. They re-set many of the nets, but no more rabbits came out, and the ferrets made their appearance at the mouth of the holes and sniffed the air, well aware that they had driven all the rabbits out. Twenty-five rabbits had been already killed, and Quadling said,

"I never saw such a quantity of rabbits together in one set of burrows, and come out so quick as that. I can't think what the reason can be, but I doubt whether we shall be so successful in the other batches of holes."

"That dog of yours, Mr. Quadling, knows I am a duffer," said Gerard. "He came up and killed my rabbits for me, but he didn't trouble to do so to any of yours."

"Ah! he is almost human, that dog is. Now let's try the next lot."

A much smaller sand-hill was now selected, and the nets arranged over the burrows, men and dogs waiting with eager

expectation. No rabbit appeared, nor was there any sound of one. It was chilly work waiting, for a cold damp wind came up from the sea, and brought what is locally called a "sea-fret" with it.

"Somebody's been a-ferreting here," said Quadling.

Just then a brown object rolled into a net just under Gerard. He was about to pounce on it, but Peter called out, "Stop! it is a stoat. It may bite you." And jumping down to it, he stamped upon it and killed it.

"Ah, that's the reason, is it? Depend upon it, there are some more inside. Turn the other two ferrets in, Peter, take all the nets away, and stand by with the gun."

They had brought their guns with them in case they should meet with any vermin; not to shoot at the rabbits, because, where the holes are so numerous, a rabbit, unless killed stone-dead and *stopped* with the shot, is likely to roll or drag itself into a burrow, and be lost. The nets are more deadly than the guns under such circumstances.

In a very little while three other stoats made their appearance, and were shot. When the ferrets made their reappearance, the party moved on to another set of burrows, but only potted three or four rabbits. It was very likely that the stoats had been systematically hunting the warren, which might account for the number of rabbits congregated in the spot first tried.

One of the ferrets appearing rather thirsty, Quadling produced a small bottle of milk, and pouring some into the palm of his hand, he gave it the first to lap. This is always a sure precaution to take. Ferrets often get very thirsty, and will not work well if they have no opportunity of slaking their thirst.

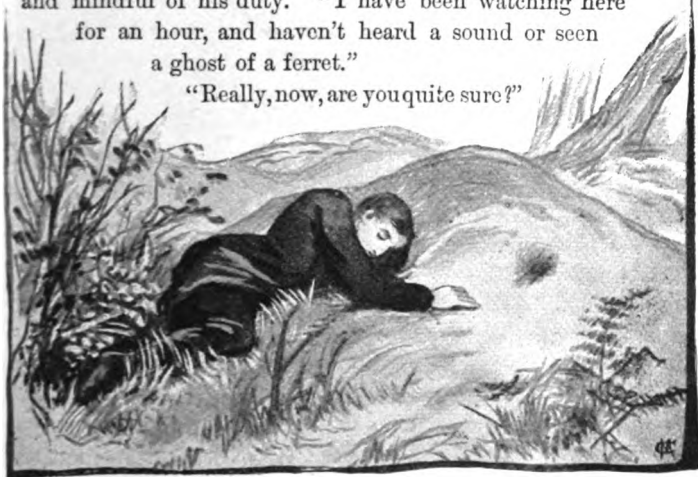
Several other sets of burrows were tried with varying success, and while Peter enjoyed himself with unabated zest, Gerard began to grow rather tired. One of the ferrets not making his appearance for some time, it was thought that he was "laid up," that is, had killed a rabbit, and was enjoying a meal on it, or that, as often happens, bunny had got to the end of his hole.

and the ferret, being unable to get past him so as to give the fatal bite behind the ear, was scratching at his unfortunate stern. Gerard volunteered to stay behind and watch for the ferret while the others proceeded farther. Gerard wriggled himself well into the dry sand, with his ear at the mouth of the burrow, and listened. He was well sheltered from the wind. He had risen very early, and was rather tired; the monotonous splash running with regular cadence along the curve of the shore soothed his senses, and he finally slept at his post. After some time the ferret came out of the hole, his claws festooned with the fur of a rabbit, and approaching the recumbent form, smelled all around it, and then as Gerard lay face downwards, his head on his arms, the little creature mounted on his back, curled itself up, and went to sleep also. In this position they were found by the others, to their amusement, and, indeed, surprise at first.

"Hallo, Gerard!" cried Peter.

"He hasn't come out yet," said Gerard, suddenly waking up, and mindful of his duty. "I have been watching here for an hour, and haven't heard a sound or seen a ghost of a ferret."

"Really, now, are you quite sure?"



ASLEEP ON DUTY.

"Quite. He couldn't have come out without my seeing him. What are you laughing at so idiotically?" answered Gerard, rising.

As he did so, the ferret rolled off his back, and if ever any one looked sold, Gerard did; but he joined heartily in the laugh against himself.

The total bag was fifty rabbits, all well-grown and fat, and while the two lads and the helpers carried them to the cottage, Mr. Quadling went round by the village to send a message to a dealer, who would take the rabbits off his hands.



CHAPTER XV.

Netting partridges—The pursuit of the poachers—Bicycle v. horse—
The capture.

GERARD left about half-past eight to return to Crostwich, but half an hour later he reappeared, startling Peter, who thought he had perhaps had a spill.

"Is Mr. Quadling in, Peter?"

"Yes. What is the matter, Gerard?"

"I think there are poachers about. In fact, I am sure there are. Let us go in to Quadling; it will save two tellings."

"Bless us, Mr. Gerard, what's the matter?" said Mr. Quadling.

"Have you had a fall on the road?"

Gerard looked excited and rather pale, but he said quietly,

"There are some poachers at work netting partridges. As I was going along the road, I saw a small speck of light in the fields on the right-hand side. It was going from side to side across the field, in a zigzag fashion, and I could not make out what it was. At first I thought it might be a will-o'-the-wisp, but then the ground is too dry. I think the field is a stubble. Then I met a dog-cart, with one man in it, slowly walking towards me, and just opposite to where the light was. I called out good night, but he did not answer, and it came into my mind that perhaps there were some poachers at work. So I went on past a bend in the road, got off, left my bicycle in the ditch, and came across the fields, sneaking along the hedgerows, and here I am."

"Well done, my lad!" said Quadling: "the stubbles are not bushed because the birds so seldom roost there."

Bushing means placing thorn-bushes or brambles all about a field, so that, if the poachers endeavour to net it, their nets become entangled in the bushes. Partridges generally roost at night in a body, and frequently in a more or less well-defined circle, with their tails pointing in and their heads out. The



A POACHING DODGE.

poacher ascertains their whereabouts by listening to their calling as the dusk comes on, and as, if undisturbed, they will roost in the same place night after night, he can also tell by searching the fields in the day-time for their marks. The poachers provide themselves with a long net something like a drag-net, but made of the finest material, frequently silk, in order to be light to carry and fold into the smallest possible space. Stretched out to its full length, the net is drawn across the field, and dropped upon the covey, which are speedily dispatched and transferred to

the cart on the road, which is a handy means of carriage and escape.

"But what can the light be for, Mr. Quadling?" said Peter.

"Well, I've never seen it used, but I have often been told that sometimes a steady pointer is used by these gentry, and they tie a lantern round his neck so that they can see his whereabouts in the dark. When he makes a point, they know where it is by the stopping of the light, and draw the net over the spot, the dog lying down as the net touches him."

While talking they were getting ready, and one of the helpers, who had been detained to assist with the rabbits, and was then having some bread and cheese, offered to accompany them.

"There won't be more than three or four altogether, because the cart won't hold them," said the keeper, "and they won't drive this way because they would have to cross by the ferry, so they will go either to Crostwich or to Alverton. Now, if Master Gerard could get back to his bicycle unseen, go as far as the cross-roads, and there hide and watch to see which road they take, it will be of great use."

Gerard assented, and was off like a shot.

"Now you, Jack, go straight along the road, and stagger about a bit as if you were drunk; and if you see the cart, ask them to give you a lift, and abuse them if they don't, but keep out of reach of their sticks. Peter, you and I will go to the end of the spinney, and along the double fence to the stubbles, and try and drop on them direct."

Gerard reached his bicycle without seeing or being seen by any one, and made haste to the cross-roads, where he hid his bicycle in the shadow of the hedge, and climbed on to the branches of a low oak.

Jack, who knew only too well from his own experience the gait of a drunken man, went slowly along the road, and the two keepers, having gained the cover of a tall quickset hedge, ran along it, stooping down and treading as quietly as possible.

"If we don't get the men, let us get the net, because it is expensive. Look, Peter, there's the light. It is on a dog, to be sure."

They breathlessly watched the light, as they drew nearer to it, and presently saw it stop. Then, crouching low, and looking against the sky, they could distinguish the figure of a man within twenty yards of them, and knew that he was at one end of the net. When he got a little past the light, he threw his end of the net on the ground, and ran towards the light, whence there came the unmistakeable noise of birds struggling. Quadling and Peter rose together, and, leaping the hedge, ran their hardest towards the poachers. Peter's long legs took him rapidly ahead. The poachers, two in number, had taken the alarm, but not soon enough to prevent getting almost within reach of them. They abandoned the net and bolted; but Peter would certainly have had a crack at them with his stick, had not his foot caught in the net, and sent him headlong to the ground, a tremendous cropper, and squelch on to the partridges under the net. He fell so full on his breast that the wind was knocked out of him, and he could not get up for a minute or two. Mr. Quadling stopped to assist him, saying,

"It is no use my chasing them. They have the heels of me. We have got the net; let the birds go. Why, bless me! if you haven't squashed two of them as flat as a pancake. I hope you are not hurt at all."

"Not a bit. I have often had worse knocks at football," replied Peter, forgetting for the moment that such a reference might beget suspicion. It fell unheeded, however, in the excitement of the moment, and leaving the net where it was, they ran to the road. Here they found Jack, who told them that he had just got up to the cart, and had asked for a lift, when two men leaped the hedge, and jumped into the cart, which drove off at a rapid pace, the dog following behind with the lantern still around its neck, but the light extinguished.

"Do you go and gather up the net, Jack, and take it to my cottage, and Penniless and I will go to the cross-roads and see which way they have gone."

Gerard had not long been on his perch among the branches of the oak when he heard the sound of the cart advancing rapidly towards him. As it came past he saw that the horse was being urged to a gallop. It took the road to Crostwich, and Gerard at once resolved to follow them, and accordingly jumped down and got his bicycle out of the hedge. But how should he let the keepers know which way the poachers had gone in case they wished to follow? It occurred to him to place his handkerchief on the ground, and he did so, spreading it out by stones placed on the corners.

"There, they will know that means something, and it can only mean that the poachers have gone this road, and that I have followed them."

And mounting on his bicycle, he followed at his best pace. Now, the old wooden bicycles were very different animals to ride on to the present ones. They were not only "bone-shakers," but "muscle-tirers;" and as Gerard urged his steed along in the dark, over stony stretches, uneven ruts, and sandy hollows, he felt that



THE SIGNAL.

he had his work cut out for him if he desired to keep within sight of the flying cart. Fortunately the road was as level as any East Anglian road, and he had not to dismount. On he toiled, panting, straining, and bumping, but making a good nine miles an hour, meeting no one and overtaking no one, but the cart out of sight ahead. After three-quarters of an hour of this work he came within sight of the lights of Crostwich. There was a slight but rather long ascent close by the town, and as Gerard came to the bottom of this, he could make out the cart half-way up, the horse walking. No doubt the poachers thought they had distanced all pursuit, and wished to take their horse in cool. Gerard gained upon them, and then, in order not to attract their attention, he dismounted and led his bicycle. When they came to the first houses, the poachers turned into a side lane, and following this they worked right round the town, and finally stopped at a low public house on the opposite side of the town to Wetacre. Gerard concealed himself in the shadow, and watched the three men take out the horse and lead him into the stable, leaving the cart in the yard. They then went indoors, and Gerard rode into the town and hunted up a policeman, to whom he related the incidents which had occurred. The policeman was incredulous at first, but Gerard took him to see Mr. Blackwood, and the intelligent officer was at last persuaded that Gerard might be credited with telling the truth. At Mr. Blackwood's suggestion, the policeman was sent to watch the public, and see that the men did not slip away unseen; and Gerard hired a horse and trap, and drove back in search of the keepers, being well satisfied that Mrs. Spencer would gladly defray the cost.

Meanwhile, Quadling and Peter, having arrived at the cross-roads, and found no one there, surmised that Gerard had followed the fugitives.

"If he has done so," said Peter, "he will have left some sign to show which road he has gone. Let us hunt about. Ah! here

it is; he has left his handkerchief on the ground. They have gone to Crostwich."

"I don't feel inclined to walk all that way, and indeed I can't," said Quadling; "but if you like to go, do."

"All right, I will," said Peter; and he set off at the long swinging trot which had carried him many miles while playing "hare and hounds." Alternately running and walking, he went on until he met a trap, and heard Gerard's voice calling out,

"Is that you, Peter?"

They drove quickly back to Crostwich, and straight up to the public, where the policeman joined them out of his ambush. They held a consultation as to their mode of procedure. The public was closed for the night, and admittance could not be gained without knocking and making a noise. That would give the men time to hide, or possibly escape, and it was determined to see if an entrance could not be gained at the back. So two of them crept quietly around, while the third watched the front. They found that the back kitchen-door was slightly ajar, and that there was a light in the interior. Pushing the door open, Peter and the policeman walked in, and found, sitting by the kitchen fire, the landlord and his wife, and three ill-favoured rascals, whom they did not doubt were the poachers.

"Nabbed, by Jingo!" exclaimed one of them, when he saw both keeper and policeman.

And nabbed they were. A conviction against all three followed in due course. The case excited a good deal of attention, and both Peter and Gerard were put in the witness-box and cross-examined. Curiously enough, the relationship between the two was never guessed at. Peter and Gerard held their tongues as to it; and, at a hint from Peter that it might damage Gerard's prospects, Mr. Quadling did not mention it. There was no similarity of names to provoke remark, and it was assumed throughout that they were strangers, except in the relation of keeper and gentleman. Gerard did not like this, and would

many times have said "my brother," had he not been afraid of Peter's displeasure: the brother whom he had always obeyed.

The net captured was a splendid specimen of the net-maker's skill. It was of fine silk thread, extremely light, and must have cost a great deal. Mr. Quadling could not make out why the poachers selected his preserves so late in the season, when the coveys were small and scattered. He supposed that they came as much for the sport of the thing as the profit. Poaching is a terrible thing. It is even more fascinating than gambling, and, in another way, leads to as dire results. The desire of sport, the attractions of a life which is idle during the day, and busy only during the hours of darkness, the occasional large profit easily earned, the excitement of evading the law, make up a temptation which leads many a decent man to drink, misery, and crime; and a starving family has to be supported by the parish.



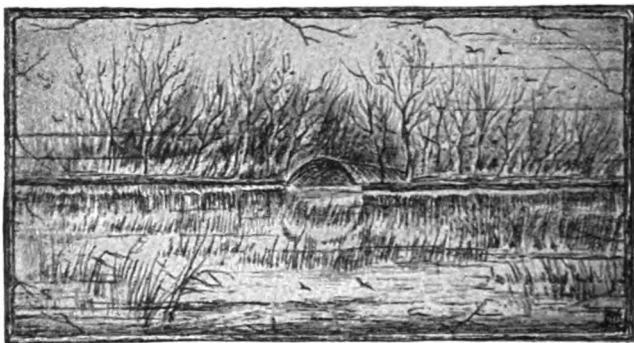
CHAPTER XVI.

The arrival of the fowl—Working the decoy—Whole fowl and half fowl.

THE fowl had begun to arrive. In the stillness of the starry night one could hear the whistling of their wings overhead, and their strange-sounding cries. And as they came from their northern breeding-places, whence they were driven by too great frost and snow, speeding to the southward, detachments of them would turn aside, where there seemed the quiet and watery seclusion which they love, and stay. Day after day there were fresh arrivals on the lake, and each fresh batch that came, after circling round and round over the water, would alight at that end where lay the decoys, and where the brown decoy ducks seemed happy and contented. By twos and threes, and then a dozen at a time, they came, mallard, widgeon, and teal; and Peter looked forward with pleasure to seeing the working of the mysterious decoy. The greatest caution was exercised each day in approaching the water, and if the wind happened to blow from them towards the ducks, they would light pieces of dry turf, which, while smouldering, emitted a pungent smell. This was for the purpose of destroying the human scent, which might otherwise be carried down to and alarm the fowl. Whenever they went into the traverses, they would carefully pick up and throw aside any branch or stick, the accidental breaking of which might make a noise, until the traverses, with their mossy sides and clean footpaths, looked as neat as a garden walk. So much stooping was necessary, that Peter heartily wished the reed screens

had been made a foot higher, for he had not only to bend his back, but his knees, and Quadling often laughed to see him lolloping along, with his long arms and legs all over the place, and a comical expression of discomfort on his face.

There was one spot in the wood whence a good view of the decoy could always be obtained, and it was customary for both of them to take a survey from that spot every time they passed it.



DECOY BAY.

Early one morning Peter paused there, and saw only a few scattered ducks in the bay. Two hours later, as he returned bearing the produce of his traps, he saw that a nice flock of fowl were resting on the still surface of the bay not far from the pipe. Imparting this information to Quadling, the latter said,

"Well, Peter, I will now show you how a decoy is worked ;" and thrusting two pieces of turf into the kitchen fire to get them well aglow, he called his dog to him.

As they reached the commencement of the traverses, the keeper said, "Now, Peter, creep as cautiously and silently as ever you did in your life, and keep the turf so your breath passes over it."

Like two assassins creeping up to surprise a victim, they proceeded at the *double*—not *quick*, but *bend*—slowly down the

trenches. Peter felt desperately inclined to sneeze and cough, for he held the turf closer to his nose than he need have done. In their silent anxious progress every trifling noise was exaggerated. If a rabbit rustled in the brake, or a squirrel pattered up a tree, the keeper looked angry. A wood-pigeon flew from the top of a fir-tree with some noise. "Drat it," said the keeper. A jay took its departure with a chatter of alarm. "Drat it," said the keeper, under his breath. At last they reached the oblique screens of the decoy, and knelt down behind them. Thrust through the reeds were small flat pieces of wood. A half-turn of one of these sideways would open a small hole, through which one could peep. Peter, following Quadling's example, peeped through, and beheld a charming sight. About a score of fowl, mallard, and widgeon were gathered together, close by the mouth of the pipe, with some of the decoy ducks among them, while many of the wild ones shewed nothing but their sterns, their heads, and necks being under water, feeding on the grain at the bottom. The faint winter sunshine lit up the sheeny plumage of the drakes and of the widgeon, and their reflections were about as bright as themselves, but were distorted by the ripples caused by their movements. The mallards sat high on the water, as compared with the others, and looked twice as large as the widgeon and teal. It was a wonderfully pretty and interesting sight, and Peter felt already repaid for the hard work the repairing of the decoy had occasioned him.

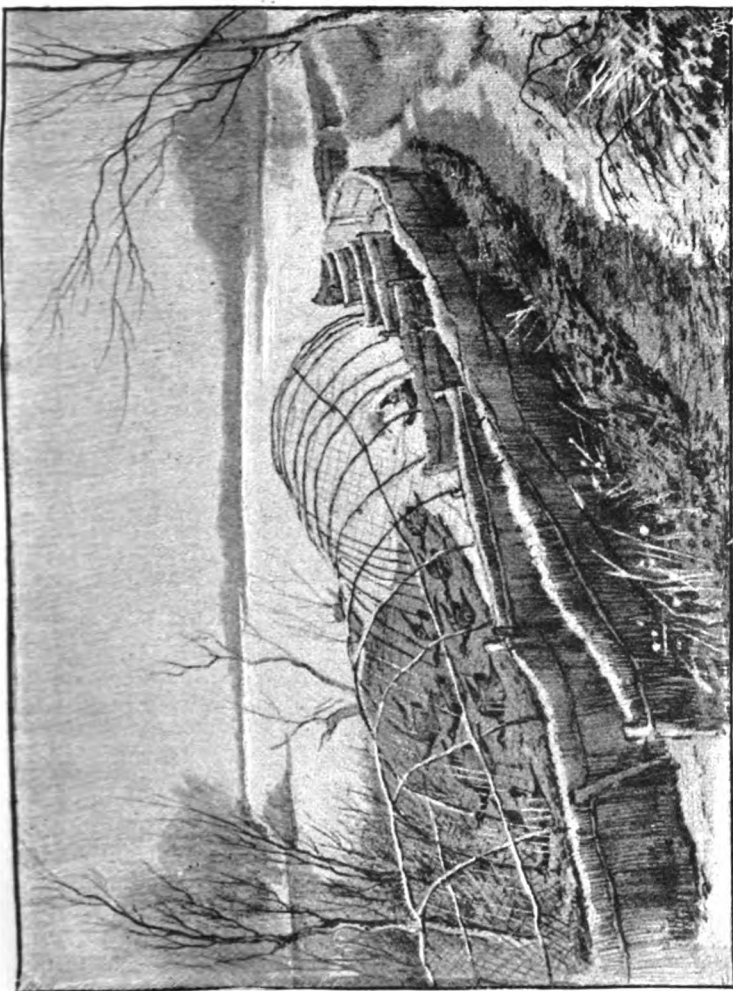
"Now, keep you as still as a mouse, Peter. Don't cough or sneeze, and, above everything, don't let your hat be seen above the screens."

Quadling stole quietly down to near the mouth of the pipe, his intelligent dog following closely at his heels. When he arrived at the last oblique screen, he made a slight motion with his hand to the dog, which immediately jumped over the low barrier between the screens into the pipe, trotted a yard or two

up, without so much as giving a glance at the fowl, and jumped back again behind the screens. Peter, watching the ducks, saw them raise their heads, and look towards the pipe. The dog again made a momentary appearance a little higher up the pipe, and the ducks began to swim steadily after it, their heads turning from side to side, and their eyes twinkling with an unmistakable expression of pleased curiosity. They were soon well within the pipe, and within a couple of yards of Peter, who was watching them breathlessly, and dreadfully inclined to sneeze or cough. Quadling, who had kept abreast of the dog, peeped through one of the peepholes, and, seeing that the fowl were now fairly in the pipe, he ran back so as to get behind them, and then, crouching at one of the dog jumps, he became visible to the fowl within the pipe, though not to those remaining outside. Waving his handkerchief to frighten them, they started, in great affright, to fly up the pipe, the keeper following them, and urging them on at each opening; and Peter followed him, doing the same, and managing to tumble over the dog, which kept so close to heel that it got between his legs. Up the gradually narrowing pipe the poor fowl were driven, beating against the network, and splashing into the water; but only one thought of turning back, which it did in safety. At last they came to the fatal poke at the end, and when they had crowded into this, the keeper detached the end hoop, which was supported on a groove formed by two pairs of posts, gave it a turn so as to hoist up the network and close the opening, and then proceeded to pull out the unfortunate ducks one by one, and wring their necks, which he did with great rapidity, throwing them on the ground as despatched. If any fluttered away from the heap, the dog quietly brought them back, but otherwise he manifested no sign of excitement. There were exactly a score of birds in the net, ten mallard, six widgeon, and four teal.

"How many do you make, Peter?" asked Quadling.

"Twenty," answered Peter.



WORKING THE DECOY.

"No; count again."

Peter did so, and again said there were twenty.

"No, my lad, there are not. There are only fifteen."

Peter laid them out one by one, counting out in a loud whisper, for speaking was tabooed. "One, two, &c., nineteen, twenty."

Quadling picked out the widgeon and teal, and said,

"These are only half fowl, Peter, and two only count the same as one mallard, which is a whole fowl. So you see there are only fifteen fowl."

"Oh, very well," replied Peter, in the stage-whisper in which their conversation was conducted. "I shall know next time. But can you decoy any more in?"

"I don't know. Let us go and see."

They crept back, and scanned the water through their peep-holes. Several fowl were about, but not a sufficient quantity, or near enough to make it worth while to try again.

"Never work the pipe unless you feel certain that you can do it Peter, for if the fowl are alarmed, and go back, they will alarm the others."

"There are a lot of fowl just in front of the opposite pipe," said Peter, indicating the pipe on the other side of the lake which he was viewing through his binocular.

"Ay, but we can't work that with this wind. The ducks always swim and rise up wind. Here the wind blows from us to them, which is right, but there the wind blows from the ducks to the people, which is wrong. We will take a look at the east pipe. That is sideways to this wind, and we may manage it"

So they crept along a further set of traverses to the east pipe, and there they saw a group of mallard, some way out, with two or three decoy ducks closer in. When the dog was put through, the decoy ducks swam up to the mouth of the pipe, expectant of a supply of food, and the wild ducks swam a little way after them, and then halted and drew together.

"They are suspicious, Peter, we must leave them for another day. You've let your turf go out. You mustn't do that. Blow on it to keep it aglow. Now we will carry the fowl up to the cottage, and send word to the dealer. You can enter the take in the decoy books, for I enter every bird taken with the date, and to whom, and for what price it is sold."

From this time the decoy was frequently worked, and daily visited. Peter grew very fond of the quiet, sheltered traverses which were so lonely and secluded, overshadowed by trees, and cushioned with moss; but Quadling made the decoy (or the 'coy, as he always called it) his especial care, and Peter had to see to the trapping and other duties of a keeper's lot. Often, however, from the one spot where the decoy was visible in the wood, he watched Quadling go through the operation—himself unseen,—and thought he knew all about it. So one day when the keeper was at Crostwich, disposing of some fowl and rabbits, Peter, seeing a quantity of fowl near one of the pipes, took the dog with him and essayed to rival his master.

All went well at first; the dog went through his part of the performance as gravely as usual, and the fowl—which, by the way, were all pochards—followed with great willingness up the pipe, but there Peter's success ended. When he tried to frighten them further up they turned back, and flew right past him out of the pipe, and escaped. Peter was amazed. He was sure it was not his own fault, for he had faithfully copied every action of Mr. Quadling's. Why should pochard behave in a different manner to mallard and widgeon? He held his tongue as to what he had done, but he took an early opportunity of casually asking Quadling whether he ever caught any pochard in the pipes.

"No, you can't catch pochard, save now and then an odd one. They will always make back. I've tried dropping a net from the top of the pipe behind them, but they will dive under it. It is no use trying to decoy them. But it is time for

you to try your hand at decoying. You shall take the next lot."

And on the following day Peter was so fortunate as to make a fair haul of fifteen mallard, or whole fowl, carrying the task through quietly and without any mistake, to his own extreme satisfaction and delight.



CHAPTER XVII.

A Man shot by a Rabbit—A white-tailed Eagle—The Air-Gun—Some practical jokes.

A KEEPER'S life is a perpetual struggle against poachers, human and brute. He disposes of the latter by shooting, trapping, and poisoning, and of the former by capture and conviction. It is not often, however, that a human poacher is punished by the agency of the game he kills; but a very singular instance of this occurred at Wetacre shortly after the conviction of the partridge netters. One Sunday morning both keepers were sitting down to breakfast after coming in from their rounds, when a boy came running in, breathless with excitement, to say that a man had been found in a gravel-pit, on the furthest corner of the estate, who had either shot himself or been shot. Sending the boy on to the doctor with a message for him to follow, Quadling and Peter hurried off to the scene of the accident. There, in a hut built for the shelter of horses which were brought occasionally to cart away gravel, and lying on a heap of dried ferns, lay a farm labourer, with a nasty gunshot wound in his leg. A couple of women and a man, of the genus tramp, who, while passing by, had heard his moans, and carried him to the hut, were the only other persons present. The wounded man was a labourer on Mr. Knox's farm, named William Stokes, and had hitherto borne a good character; but he had commenced to "keep company" with Susie Saunders, who appeared to have instilled poaching ideas into his head.

He would not now say how the accident occurred, but while the doctor was attending to him Quadling and Penniless walked into the gravel-pit to examine the place where the accident occurred. They found the gun lying on the ground some yards away from the place where it was evident, from the traces, the man had received his wound, and it appeared that the gun had gone off



A MAN SHOT BY A RABBIT.

while on the ground, for the grass was scorched, and the track of the shot was visible along the ground extending to where the fellow had fallen. It seemed strange if the gun had gone off by itself, but it looked uncommonly like it. There were several rabbit-burrows about, and as a ferret just then emerged from one of them, it was clear what Stokes had been about. Confiscating the ferret, they returned to the hut, where they met Mr. Knox, who had just heard of the accident.

"It is a bad wound. He must go to the hospital at Crostwich," said the doctor.

"Very well, then, I will send a cart with some straw and blankets, and make him comfortable, and send him off, with a man to take care of him," replied Mr. Knox.

It was not for some days that Stokes would say how the accident occurred, but at last he stated the curious fact that a *rabbit had shot him*. He explained that he had laid his gun down full cock, in front of a burrow, while he had gone to listen for the ferret at another, a few yards off. Suddenly a rabbit bolted out over his gun, and, its foot catching in the trigger, caused its discharge. Stokes being in the line of shot, kneeling down, got hit in the calf of his right leg. The singularity of the accident, caused as it was by the very animal whose death he had himself desired, affected him more than the wound, and caused him to resolve that never more would he be tempted to poach. He gave his gun up to Quadling, who sold it for two pounds, and privately gave the proceeds to the man's mother, who was thankful for the help while her son was out of work. Of course, any further punishment for the man was out of the question.

On this same Sunday, while returning from the gravel-pit, another poacher, this time not a human one, was discovered in as bad a predicament as Stokes.

In the distance they could see the tall pole by the lake on which the hawk-trap was perched, and they could make out that some large bird was there on the very top, and of necessity caught in the trap. Quadling sent Peter to see what it was, while he went home to finish his breakfast. As Peter approached the pole, he saw the bird make several ineffectual attempts to fly away, falling each time to the length of the chain, and only regaining the top of the pole by the greatest effort. It was a magnificent bird, and Peter at once put it down as a golden eagle. But how was he to secure the prize? He climbed a little way up the pole, but saw that to attempt to seize the bird alive

would only entail severe consequences to himself from its talons and beak. Shooting it was out of the question, because of the alarm to the decoy. Being entirely puzzled, therefore, and much excited, he ran to the cottage, and explained the difficulty. But Quadling was not to be moved until he had finished his breakfast, and, as Peter was hungry enough, he followed his example.

"It can't be a golden eagle, lad. Maybe it's an osprey."

"No, it's breast is not white enough, and it is much larger. But how are we to kill it? It will be cruel to leave it until night when the decoy has risen."

"Well, I think we can get over that difficulty. Did you ever see an air-gun? Some years ago we collared one from a poacher, and it and the pump are up in the lumber-room. We'll go and get it."

The air-gun and its pump were found. It was in the shape of a thick walking-stick, but made of black iron highly polished, and was very heavy, although in appearance, at a little distance, it looked nothing more than a thick black stick with bone handle. The butt of it unscrewed, and contained the reservoir for the air. The pump nozzle screwed into this, and it required no slight labour to charge it with sufficient compressed air for half a dozen shots. When this was done they had a long hunt for bullets to fit it, but some were found at last, and, thus equipped, they started off for the pole.

"I do believe it is a golden eagle," cried Quadling, entering suddenly into Peter's excitement. "What a pity we can't get it alive; but I see no chance of that. I know I wouldn't risk my eyes by going aloft after it. Now let me rest the gun on your shoulder, and take a steady shot at it. Missed, I declare. Do you take the next shot."

Peter tried his hand, but only knocked a splinter off the side of the pole. Quadling tried the proverbially lucky third time, and the noble bird fell the length of the chain, and after a momentary struggle died. Peter quickly ascended and freed it

from the trap, which he reset. They smoothed its plumage, and carried it carefully home, and sent a message to the doctor naturalist to call and see it when he had come from church. When he came he pronounced that it was not a golden eagle, but the white-tailed or sea-eagle, sometimes called the erne, which breeds usually in the north, and in Ireland, and seldom comes to the south or east of England.

"Look at its white tail and feathered legs. That will shew you that it is not a golden eagle. I wonder what brought it so far south? Perhaps there is some hard weather on the way. It could not have hurt your game much, for it feeds principally on fish."

"Ay, ay," replied Quadling, "but it frightens the fowl all the same, just as an osprey does. I should not kill an osprey if it were not for the decoy. Now what shall we do with this? Mrs. Spencer would like to have it stuffed no doubt. Didn't you tell me you could stuff, Peter?"

"Yes, I can pretty well. I'll stuff it if you like."

"Do so, lad, and if it is well done we will send it as a Christmas present to Mrs. Spencer."

"I wish you would lend me that air-gun, Mr. Quadling. If it is so useful to a poacher, it will be useful to a decoy-keeper to kill vermin."

"You shall have it, Peter. I'll give it to you. I haven't patience to use such a thing myself, but you are young, and don't mind trouble."

Peter was extremely fond of anything mechanical, and the air-gun was a source of great amusement to him. The report it made was so very slight that it might be fired anywhere quite close to the decoy, and after a little practice he became expert in its use, so that at twenty-five yards or so he could make pretty sure of a carrion crow (if he could get so near, which was seldom), or a rat, or rabbit, or anything else which might want killing. The presence of rabbits in and about the traverses was

not encouraged, and if any made their appearance there they had to be removed either by trapping or by the use of Peter's air-gun.

Gerard had not made his appearance on the Saturday, having something to do for his chief, but on that eventful Sunday he made his appearance in time for dinner, having walked over. The brothers went to church in the afternoon, and then for a stroll on the jetty, and Gerard amused Peter very much by a tale of a trick played upon the second master by some of the boys. This gentleman, who was an elderly broken-down clergyman, was very fond of turning, and had a lathe fitted up in a loft over a disused stable in the corner of the playground. Some of the elder boys were sometimes admitted, as a favour, to see him fashioning various articles in the intervals between school hours. One of them happened to notice that the master, while working the treadle of the lathe with his left foot, invariably stood with the right foot placed in the same spot, where the heel had worn a semicircular mark in the deal flooring. This boy, being a practical joker, during the master's temporary absence, bored a hole through the floor in the centre of the heel mark; then, when the master was again busy at his lathe, with his foot in the exact spot, the boy got on a chair in the stable beneath, and inserting a stout screw in the hole, proceeded laboriously to force it with a screw-driver into the leather of the master's heel. That gentleman, intent on his lathe, and pressing hard against the floor in order to throw his weight on to the treadle, never felt or noticed what was being done. Presently when the school bell rang, he attempted to obey the summons, but, to his amazement, his right foot refused to move. He appeared to have jumped to the conclusion that he was paralyzed, for some little time after, when Gerard was sent to recall him to his class, he found him leaning against the bench with his face in his hands, and in a state of great distress. On Gerard's attempting to help him to the stairs, the heel of his boot was wrenched off, and the trick was exposed. The master

was so pleased at finding that his fears were groundless, that he good-naturedly refused to ask who the offender was, or take steps to have him punished.

That reminded Peter of the following tale of a bricklayer, who was once employed on the altering of the stables at their old home. He had an unfortunate habit of taking more beer at his dinner ^{hour} than was good for him, and so becoming fuddled for the afternoon. One morning he had to wheel a quantity of bricks from the carts to the work, and was doing his work so steadily that the foreman said to him, "What a pity it is that you won't be able to work so well after you have had your dinner."

"Tell you what, mister," replied the man, "I can lift a bigger load after my beer than I can before. Now here's a load," piling up the bricks as he spoke. "Now none o' you can wheel that, I know."

"No; neither can you."

"I can't now, but I'll bet you a quart I can after my beer."

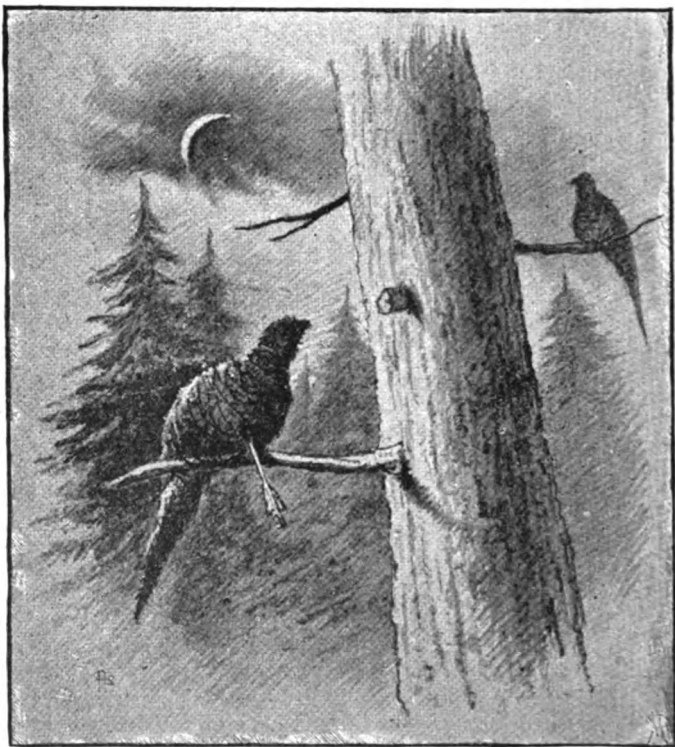
During his absence after his beer, his fellow workmen screwed the two legs of the wheelbarrow firmly to the planks on which it stood. When the men assembled at their work again, it was evident that the bricklayer had taken even more than his usual quantity, and was proportionately unsteady. However, he took hold of the handles of his barrow, and gave a mighty heave. It did not move, and he tugged and strained amid the jeers of his comrades. At last he confessed himself beaten, and took several layers of bricks off the load. Still he could not lift it. Scratching his poll in amazement, he proceeded to lessen the load still further, but still he could not lift it. In great confusion and perplexity, he made successive reductions in the load and successive futile heaves, until the very last brick was reached, and when, amid roars of laughter, he failed to lift even the one brick, he staggered off to the foreman, and requested to be allowed to sign the pledge.

CHAPTER XVIII

Pheasant poaching—Imitation pheasants—Poaching by archery—Watching for, and capture, of the archeress.

AS the winter advances, and the undergrowth lessens in thickness and concealing power, the pheasants take to roosting at night in the trees, and it is singular how they will select bare trees, where they may easily be viewed by any person looking upwards. Poachers take advantage of this habit to shoot the pheasants on their perch. It is curious how easily a practised eye can make out the dark form of the bird among the branches on even a fairly dark night. A clear starlit night is as good as any, and, creeping quietly through the woods, the poacher keenly scrutinizes the trees until he sees the pheasant between him and the sky, and his shot brings it down. Where the poacher can procure an air-gun, he uses it in preference to an ordinary gun, as it makes but a slight pop, which cannot be heard many yards off, and there is thus less risk of detection. If he cannot, however, procure such an expensive article, he will put but a small charge of powder in his gun, the distance being so little, and the report is but slight, and does not travel far if there is any noise of wind in the woods, with the rattle and creak of swaying branches, to drown the sound; or he uses a pea-rifle, or even—since Peter's time, however—those cheap air-guns actuated by a strong spring, which have lately become so common. A poacher with an air-gun, stealthily hunting the coppice, is not

easy to catch: there are such opportunities of concealment. Keepers have, however, an ingenious plan of thwarting his designs. They make imitation pheasants of a bundle of straw



IMITATION PHEASANTS.

or reeds—or maybe a roughly-stuffed pheasant's skin—and fix these dummies up in the trees so that in the dark the poachers mistake them for the genuine article, and fire at them. A few

disappointments of this kind will make the midnight prowler chary of wasting his shots and his energies, and he will prefer to try some other wood.

We read in old sporting books that roosting pheasants used to be taken by nooses on the end of long rods, but such a method is not lucrative enough for the modern poacher.

Mr. Quadling had not been troubled very much with this sort of poaching, for no one dared invade the sanctity of the decoy with a gun, and air-guns were not to be picked up on the beach. So there were no dummies in the trees until Peter, being at a loss for a job, one wet afternoon made a few out of reed bundles and set them in some trees.

He never gave a second thought to his dummies until some weeks afterwards, when, passing by one of the trees, he looked up and caught sight of one of them. There was something sticking in it that he had not put there. It looked like a piece of stick. He climbed up the tree, and to his great surprise he found an *arrow*. It was remarkably neat and well made, with a sharpened nail let into the head of it, and the feathers at the butt laid on with a scientific twist, in order to make the arrow spin, and so steady its flight.

Peter sat astride a branch with the arrow in his hand reflecting. No idle schoolboy had shot that arrow, because it must have been shot in the night, when idle schoolboys keep out of dark woods. It was undoubtedly the handiwork of a poacher, but of whom? It must be someone not only of an ingenious turn of mind, but patient, and a good marksman with the bow, Peter got down and visited his other dummies, eight in all, and in one other he found a similar arrow, which put the poaching intention beyond a doubt.

"Can it be Susie Saunders?" suddenly asked Peter of himself. "She is just the girl not to be daunted by one escape. Ten to one it is she, trying another dodge. If Quadling catches her a second time she will have to be convicted, and what a horrible

thing that will be for a pretty girl like her. I must watch, myself, and if I catch her— Well! I'll be shot if I know what to do then."

Peter said nothing to Quadling, but for three nights he spent a couple of hours in the hollow of a tree, which was only a few yards from a group of firs where pheasants were nightly in the habit of roosting. On the first and second nights he heard nothing, but on the third night he had better success. He had come upon a late round about twelve o'clock, reported himself to Quadling by means of a stone at his window and a double whistle, and then instead of turning into his own bed he turned back into the wood. He was sleepy and tired enough, but his curiosity was so great that he resisted the impulse to seek his well-earned rest, and set out to keep his vigil.

It was a cloudy night, but the clouds were suffused with the light of the moon, which they hid, so that the branches of the trees were clearly to be seen against the clouds. Peter got under his tree, where he was warm and comfortable, and watched the firs where he thought the poacher might come, for the simple reason that if Peter had been a poacher, those were the trees that Peter would make for. For half an hour there was no sign, and no sound but the faint whisperings of the trees in the wind. Peter got a rare start, however. After staring hard at the nearest fir-tree—in the branches of which he could distinguish a slumbering pheasant—he turned his eyes into his own domicile. He found it shining with a pale bluish light, which surrounded him in streaks and patches. For a moment he thought it uncanny, then he knew it was simply phosphorescent—the light that is often seen in decayed wood, the "touchwood" of our boyish days.

It was a common practice with us to pick out bits of this touchwood, and carry them home to exhibit the faint glow to admiring friends in the dark, and a very luminous piece was a marketable commodity, worth a piece of wasp cake, or a missel

thrush's egg. Peter's tree, which had not shone the previous two nights, now, upon a change of temperature or moisture in the air, shone with remarkable lustre, and Peter, thinking this might draw the attention of a poacher to his place of concealment, was about to withdraw and seek another, when he heard the crack of a twig, and then a slight rustle. Then a small figure emerged, and stood under the fir tree, peering up. The figure had a bow in its left hand, and, adjusting an arrow to the string, aimed at the pheasant in the tree, and, with a twang, the arrow sped straight to the heart of the hapless pheasant, which fell plump to the ground. As the figure stooped to pick it up, Peter was upon it, and felt the same supple form and heard the same startled scream that had surprised him when he captured the rabbit snarer.

"Ah! Susie, I've got you again, have I?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, dear! Mr. Penniless, you will let me go, won't you?"

"I can't. I shall not be doing my duty. Why can't you let the game alone, Susie? You've got into one scrape before; you were the cause of your sweetheart being shot in the leg, and now you are in for a conviction, and perhaps will be sent to gaol. And what is the good of your poaching? You can't make much out of it."

"Oh, no! but it is in my blood. I like the wildness and the sport of it. My father was a gipsy, Mr. Penniless, and I suppose I am a gipsy too."

"No, you don't!" exclaimed Peter, as she made a sudden wrench to get free. "I don't mean to let you go. But tell me, what made you think of such a dodge?"

"It was through reading a ballad about Robin Hood that grandmother has, so I made a bow myself" (this Peter did not believe; as he felt the instrument he was sure that it had been through the hands of a skilled carpenter, and he resolved to find that out in the morning), "and I found I could easily hit any thing close to."

"And how many pheasants have you killed?"

"This one makes the thirteenth. That's always an unlucky number. Please let me go. Do, Mr. Penniless. I'll never, never, poach again." And taking refuge in woman's surest weapons—tears and sobs—she pleaded hard enough to melt a harder heart than poor Peter's.

He did not believe her protestations. He knew that he could not trust her for a week; he knew that it was his duty to acquaint Mr. Quadling, and allow him to be the judge of what was best to be done; but knowing all this, his big soft heart revolted at the idea of sending a girl to gaol. Nothing but ruin to her could result. Susie knew that Peter was hesitating, and disposed to be her friend. She was keen enough to see that his was not the character to be influenced by any blandishments, or she might have tried the effect of such; but she instinctively recognized the chivalry of his nature, and appealed only to his pity.

"Well, Susie," said Peter at last, "I am doing wrong, and neglecting my duty, but I suppose I must let you go, and say nothing about it. Give me your bow and arrows, and get away home. But I give you my word of honour, that if I catch you poaching a third time, I will not shield you."

"Thank you, Mr. Penniless. I promise——"

"No, don't promise, because you will only break it. Go, quick!" And the wild girl vanished, leaving Peter sorely disturbed in his mind at what he feared was a dereliction of duty on his part. Shoving the dead pheasant down a rabbit-hole, as a convenient way of burying it, he returned to his room.

In the morning he took the bow to the carpenter's shop in the village, where he found, as he expected, a young fellow named French, an apprentice, planing away.

"Morning, French."

"Morning, Mr. Penniless. How are you this morning?"

"Have you ever seen this before, French?" asked Peter, showing him the bow.

French looked disconcerted, and answered rather sullenly that he had.

Peter broke it in two across his knee, and throwing the pieces on the bench, he said,

"Take those to Susie Saunders, and tell her not to ask your help in any of her pranks, or she will get you into trouble as well as herself. Take my advice and have nothing to do with her. She is a dangerous little minx, and has got one man at least into trouble. Good morning."

And so ended that episode.



CHAPTER XIX.

Partridge driving—Shooting with a Kite.

WHEN Peter returned to the cottage he found Quadling talking to two young gentlemen, the shorter of whom Peter soon discovered was Mrs. Spencer's son, and the taller, and elder, was his cousin, a son of Colonel Harvey's. They were at Wetacre Hall for the Christmas holidays, and had first of all made their way to the keeper's to see what sport he could provide for them.

"Now come, Quadling; you must give us some partridge shooting," said Harvey. "I've had a new breechloader given to me, and I haven't used it yet."

"There are not very many birds, and they are very wild, sir; but if you could get a *kite* now, that would keep them down, so that you might get some shots."

"Then we will drive into Crostwich this afternoon and buy a kite," answered Harvey. "I saw one there in the summer, in a gunsmith's window, and it's sure not to be sold."

Spencer assented to his cousin's proposal, and they set off to Crostwich in a pony cart to buy the kite. It was evident to Peter that Spencer was a quiet boy, who would follow his cousin's lead, but that Harvey was a spirited lad of his own age. He had just left Harrow, and was going into the army in due course, and Peter took a liking to him at once. Both the

young gentlemen had scrutinized Peter pretty closely, and talked about him as they drove along.

"I say, that under-keeper is a big chap, but no older than I am, I am sure," said Harvey.

"He is a splendid fellow ; and do you know he is so like one of the fellows at Eton, a regular swell among the 'wet bobs.' If he were only dressed like a gentleman you wouldn't know the difference."

"Oh, you often see country fellows that would make capital gentlemen, with a little training. What was the name of the swell at Eton ?"

"Longford, or Langley, or something like that," answered Spencer.

If Peter had overheard this conversation, it would have made him extremely uncomfortable. As it was, although he did not recognize Spencer's face, or suppose that Spencer would have any suspicion as to himself, he felt rather dubious about Gerard, whose appearance was very little altered since the Eton days. He debated whether he should not write to Gerard to keep away from Wetacre for a while, but the pleasure of his brother's company on Saturdays, and occasional Sundays, was so great that he could not find it in his heart to do this, and he concluded to let things take their chance. As it happened, although Gerard came very frequently, neither Spencer nor Harvey ever saw him there. Peter simply avoided assisting the young gentlemen in their sports on Saturday, and did not allow Gerard to go to Wetacre Church on Sunday mornings, when alone the family from the Hall were there. There were one or two narrow shaves, which made Peter uneasy, but no actual meeting ; and, shortly after Christmas, Spencer accompanied Harvey to the home of the latter, to spend the rest of the holidays.

But what is the "kite" that the two young gentlemen were going so eagerly to try ? It was not, of course, the ordinary triangular kite which boys and men fly for the mere purpose of

seeing how high it can go. That has no connection with sport with the gun. The kite used for sporting purposes is fashioned so as to resemble a bird of prey, a large hawk, or kite.

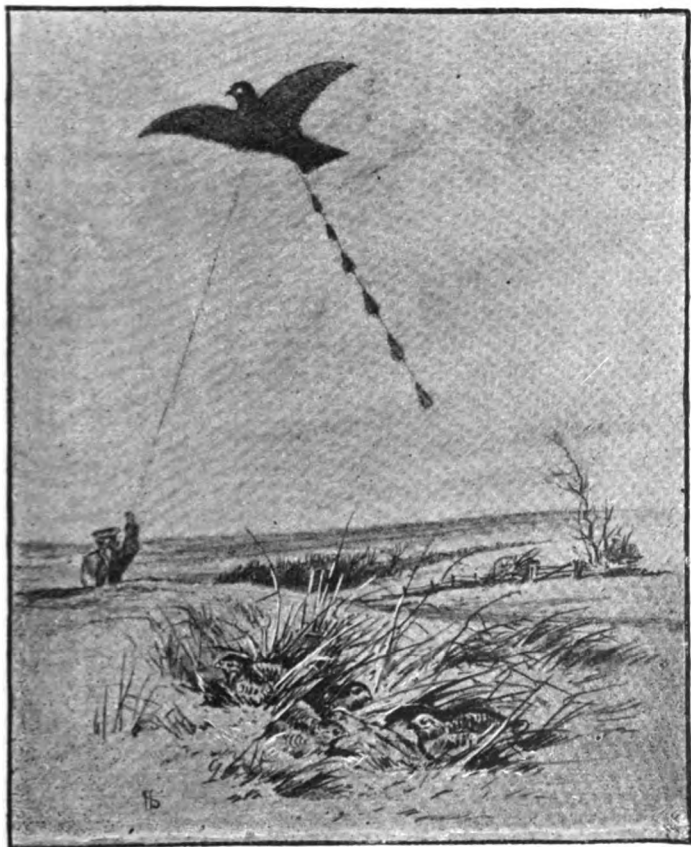
All birds are naturally afraid of the hawk tribe, and seek concealment in bushes, or other hiding-places. Partridges, when alarmed in this manner, skulk close to the ground, trusting to the similarity of their colour to that of the stubble to escape the keen eye of the hawk. They will not take flight, or even run, unless absolutely compelled, for the motion would attract the attention of the hawk. When partridges are wild, and rise at too great distances from the gun, the ingenious plan of flying an imitation hawk over them has been hit upon, and has a wonderful effect, the birds sometimes lying so close that they have almost to be kicked up.

This may seem a somewhat unfair advantage to take of the poor birds, but it often happens that no sport would be obtainable if it were not done. Since reaping with the scythe and mowing machines has superseded the ancient sickle, the stubble is left very short, so short that it affords little shelter for the birds, and after the coveys have been shot at a few times they become wary and unapproachable. The only thing is then either to use the kite, or to drive the partridges over the guns, like grouse are driven on the moors.

When Spencer and Harvey returned with the kite, it was tried, and pronounced to look remarkably life-like. The small birds seemed to be also of this opinion, for they took immediately to the bushes, and the large flocks of sparrows, finches, and yellowhammers which were making merry over Mr. Knox's stackyard vanished with wonderful celerity when the kite was flown over them.

The next day it poured with rain, and was wild and stormy, so the partridges had a reprieve; but on the following day it was fine and fresh, with a slight frost in the morning, and a nice breeze.

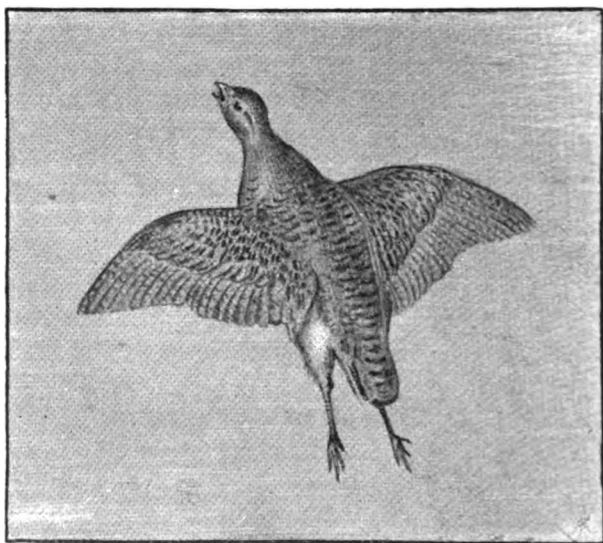
Harvey and Spencer appeared in due course, and both Quail and Penniless accompanied them. The keeper knew that



THE KITE.

there were at least two small coveys on a narrow stubble which skirted the decoy woods, and were rather too near the lake for

any shooting to be done with safety. Quadling proposed to drive the birds from there, and he sent Peter to station the young gentlemen behind a hedge in the line of flight, and two fields off; and having done this, Peter returned to Quadling, and they commenced to walk the stubble. *Whirr!* went the first covey, down the wind at express pace, rising slightly to top the



A TOWERING BIRD.

first hedge, and then skimming along a little lower to rise at the next hedge. Bang! bang! came the reports, but it was too far off to see whether any birds had been hit.

"Only one of them seems to have fired," remarked Mr. Quadling.

The next covey rose near the hedge, and went away at the same terrific pace, right over the guns. This time there were

four reports, and one bird, after towering a little, fell dead. When the keepers came to the shooters, Quadling asked, "What luck, sirs?"

"Oh, we've made a dreadful muddle of it," answered Harvey; "they come at you like a lot of cannon balls. Spencer was so frightened at the first lot that he ducked into the ditch and didn't fire, and I fired yards behind them, I know. We took the second lot more coolly, and we have killed a brace, but which of us killed them we don't know, for we fired into the brown of them. Don't shake your big head like that, Quadling. I know it is wrong to fire into the lot, because of wounding birds that die afterwards, and so on, but we couldn't help it."

They now proceeded to try the kite. The wind blew sideways to the direction they intended to walk,

and Peter, taking the string, went in advance, and well to the side, and let the kite hover over the ground in front of the guns. It flew very steadily, and the results were at once apparent, for both the pointers made a dead set at a covey, which did not rise until the guns were within fifteen yards of it. Spencer blazed away at once, and missed, but Harvey waited until the birds had got thirty yards away, and then fired at an outside bird, which dropped at once.

"Good shot, sir!" exclaimed Quadling.

The birds did not fly far. Their fear of their enemy overhead made them less fearful of their enemy on the ground. When



HARD HIT.

they did alight, they separated and ran hither and thither, so that while one dog pointed at a bird in front of the guns, the other made a set at a bird which had run back. Harvey killed one bird, and Spencer managed to stop the other with his second barrel. The next point was in a line with Peter, and he, being doubtful as to the caution of the sportsmen, threw himself at full length in the ditch, and allowed them to fire over him.



A WINGED BIRD.

They went on, over pasture and stubble, for some hours, getting a good many shots, about a third of which proved effective. Spencer would never prove a shot. He was not by any means a muff, but his tastes lay in other directions, and he took but little interest in the sport, and that only to please his cousin. Harvey,

on the other hand, enjoyed it, as Peter had done so often before under similar circumstances, and his shooting improved steadily.

While beating the last stubble, a partridge lay so close that Peter actually seized it with his hand, and, calling out to the guns to look out, he threw it into the air towards them. Spencer fired, and succeeded in winging it with his first barrel, and killing it with the second; but, unfortunately, a shot struck the kite-line and severed it, and the kite, after making several curious gyrations, fell into the middle of a good-sized pond, which was in one corner of the field. Peter volunteered to strip and dive for it, but this Quaddling would not allow; and as Spencer was plainly tired, and they had not taken any rest for lunch, they agreed to give up shooting for the day.

Peter ultimately recovered the kite by means of an improvised

drag-hook tied to a line, and at the same time hooked foul, and dragged ashore, a fine tench of four pounds in weight. No one knew that there were any tench in the pool, but subsequent angling in the month of June revealed the fact that they were there in abundance, and of large size.



CHAPTER XX.

Pike-spearing at night.

ONE day, while working the decoy, Peter saw a large pike seize a teal, and drag it under water, whence it never returned. The rest of the ducks were much alarmed, and Peter resolved to have that pike, particularly as this was not the first time he had seen it grab at the smaller fowl. This is not at all an unusual proceeding. On the very day that I write this, I met the host of an inn on the banks of a Norfolk river, who told me that a pike, which had its haunt opposite his front door, was constantly in the habit of swallowing any small water-hens or ducklings which might stray near; and that it had taken some plovers, which had been shot, and fallen into the river. He was then taking a plover's skin to be stuffed, in order that he might use it as a bait.

On the afternoon of the day that Peter saw the teal taken, Spencer and Harvey came to the cottage, and asked him if he could find them any amusement. He replied—

“I have been thinking of spearing the pike in the decoy, at night, with a light. Would you like to help?”

“Bravo! That's just the thing,” said Harvey. “The Indians spear salmon in that way, and so do poachers in the North of England. But have you got a spear?”

“I have the shaft of an eel spear, and the blacksmith could make a leister, or salmon spear, from my directions in an hour.”

“All right; we will go and watch him make it. And how about a light?”

the glare off the eyes of the oarsman. Of course he intended to propel the boat stern first. It is usual to place the light in the bows, but Peter chose the other end of the boat for greater safety.

The boys were down at the cottage punctually at nine o'clock. It was a very dark night, and very still, with no frost, and they



SPEARING PIKE.

groped their way through the wood until they reached the boat-house.

"Mind how you step, please, Mr. Spencer. Wait until I strike a light," said Peter, and the glimmer of a match lit up the water. Lighting both lamps, and arranging them in the stern, Peter took

the oars, while Harvey stood in the stern with the spear in his hand, and Spencer sat down watching. The lamps cast a circle of light on the water, which made it easy to see to the bottom through the two or three feet of clear water over the shallows. Along the margin of the reeds they quietly paddled about, pausing every few moments to scrutinize the bottom. At last Harvey made a motion to the other to keep still, and, raising his spear, he launched it through the water.

"Missed, I declare! It was a nice pike, and he stared at me with his great glittering eyes, like a water-demon."

"Did you allow for the refraction of the water, sir?"

"No, I never thought of it. What do you know of refraction, Penniless?"

"I know that you must aim a good deal nearer to you than the pike seems to be, or you will only strike over his back. If you put a stick in the water it will seem to be bent at an angle; and I have heard it called refraction," answered Peter, laughing, and vowing never to use big words again while he was a keeper.

"I say, stop! Here's an enormous eel! Looks like the sea-serpent."

Splash! went the spear, and this time its aim was true. One of the prongs entered the body of the eel, and in a moment a great broad-nosed eel, of over five pounds in weight, was twisting about in the bottom of the boat, and eluding the blows which they aimed at it.

"Did you ever see such a whopper? And what an ugly mouth it has!"

"It is a broad-nosed eel, sir, and so very coarse to eat, that you cannot give it away."

"Why, I thought there was only one sort of eel," remarked Spencer.

"There are at least three, sir. There is the silver-bellied eel, which goes to the sea in the autumn in immense numbers, and is the best to eat; the grig, a small yellow eel, which keeps to

the rivers; and these beastly broad-nosed fellows, which you generally find in lakes."

Just dipping the oars lightly in, so that the boat moved slowly without making a ripple, and keeping in the shallow water by the ghostly reeds and the overhanging branches of the trees, which seemed fantastic in the light of the lamps, they proceeded; while outside the range of the light the darkness was impenetrable.

They saw several fish which seemed to be fascinated by the glare, and did not dart away; but Harvey made several strokes without success, and then he managed to secure a pike of about seven pounds, which he lifted into the boat. He struck another, but it dropped off again and disappeared.

"Won't you take a turn?" Harvey asked of his cousin; but Spencer refused to run the risk of toppling overboard.

"We are now coming close to where the big pike lies, Mr. Harvey. Please watch closely; I am very anxious to kill it."

"Then do you take the spear; I shall be nervous and miss it. I'll row, and do what you tell me."

So they changed places. Peter stood up in the stern, with the spear ready poised, and was surprised to see how clearly every object was defined in the water. Ah! what was that? A long, dark shadow, and two gleaming eyes; a huge, voracious jaw! It was the big pike. At his signal Harvey paused, and held the boat steady. Peter was within two feet of the pike, which never budged an inch. Setting his teeth and bracing his muscles, he prepared for the stroke. The pike lay about two feet below the surface, and Peter allowed a foot for refraction. Then he struck with all his might, and he felt by the shock which thrilled through him that he had struck home. There was a mighty struggle on the part of the jack; but Peter, determined not to lose it by attempting to lift it into the boat on the end of the spear, jumped valiantly into the water, which was nearly waist-deep. He held the spear upright, and pinned

the struggling fish beneath it into the mud. The mud was soft, and both Peter and the pike were rapidly sinking into it. There was no time to be lost, and amid the excited shouts of the others, he stooped down under water and inserted his left hand well into the gills of the pike, and letting go the spear, he rose and seized the side of the boat with the other.

"Row to the shore, I can't get in the boat! I've got the pike safe enough. Ugh! the water is cold! Please make haste. You are rowing the wrong way; the water is getting deeper. Back her, please."

"I don't know which way the shore is."

"All right, here are the reeds. I have got a firmer footing now. Here is the fish," and hoisting the monster into the boat, he followed it, and knelt on it, while giving it its quietus with a stretcher.

"What a shark! Why it must weigh fifty pounds," exclaimed Spencer.

"No, sir. Not more than thirty, but it is a splendid fish."

"Well, now we must get back to the cottage at once," said Harvey, "and you must get into bed. I shouldn't like to plump overboard in the dark on a cold night. I suppose you are harder than I am though."

"One gets used to it, sir. Besides, my skin is waterproof," replied Peter.

"It isn't cold proof; I can hear your teeth chatter. Do run up at once, and we will tie the boat up and put the lamps out."

"We have left the spear in the water. We must get that. Mr. Harvey, or it may startle the ducks, for I left it sticking up like a sign-post."

The spear was soon recovered, and, hastily tying the boat up, they left, Peter carrying the fish over his shoulder, with a stout stick through their gills, and the others bearing the lamps and spear.

When he threw the pike down on the kitchen floor, Mrs. Quadling cried,

"Mercy on us! what have you got there? And, you wicked young man, you have been in the water. Get off to bed at once, and put your clothes outside the door."

"That's good advice, Peter," said Quadling. "Turn in at once, and I will bring you your supper, and a glass of hot whisky and water."

The pike was weighed, and found to be thirty-three pounds in weight, and a fine, well-made fish. It was too much cut with the spear, and damaged by the subsequent proceedings, to be worth stuffing, or its size would have well deserved that honour. I once saw a brace of pike caught in one day, one weighing thirty-one pounds, and the other thirty-six pounds. They were caught with a rod and line, and were worth looking at.

While Peter was sitting up in bed, wrapped in a blanket and eating his supper, there was a knock at his door, and Harvey's voice asked if he might come in.

"Certainly, sir," replied Peter; and the two cousins came in, looking curiously round at the simple adornments of the little room.

"I say, you are a brick of a fellow! I hope you won't take any harm. Do you know the big pool on the heath, about three miles away?"

"Yes, sir; I have seen it once."

"Well, there are no end of pike there; but it is very shallow and weedy, and there is no boat. I thought that if pike will take birds, perhaps they will take big flies made to look like birds. I can make one if you think it is of any use."

"I am sure you would have a good chance of sport."

"How could we manage to get a boat there, though?"

"The doctor in the village, Mr. Murray, has a Berthon boat—one of those canvas boats which fold up. I am sure he would lend it to me, because I so often oblige him with bird skins."

"Capital. Will you ask him to-morrow? Spencer has a salmon rod which belonged to my uncle, and a reel and line, and I will make a fly to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXI.

A Berthon boat—Fly-fishing for pike—The donkey and Spencer disappear.

THE doctor willingly consented to lend his Berthon. It was the dinghy he used for a small four-ton yacht which he used to keep. He had sold his yacht because of the difficulty in getting in and out of the harbour, but he had kept the dinghy for the sake of expeditions up the river naturalizing and fishing. The boat was eight feet long and four feet wide. It had a wooden keel, with four longitudinal ribs on each side hinged to the stem and stern. These were connected by an outer and by an inner coating of canvas, treated with a flexible paint so as to be perfectly waterproof. When in use these ribs were kept expanded by supports or stretchers from the bottom boards to the gunwales. When these were removed the ribs would fall flat alongside the keel, and the boat was accordingly shut up, and could easily be carried by one man.

To convey the boat to the pool on the heath, Peter borrowed a donkey with panniers, across which he intended to balance the boat.

In the meantime Harvey was busy with his fly. He whipped three large triangles on a piece of gimp, having previously threaded a cork between each, to support the weight of the fly on the water. A couple of large red glass beads formed two fiery eyes, and the body was formed of red and white wool, cut into short strips, and doubled, and whipped on with string, so

that they stood thickly out all around. Two eyed peacock feathers formed the wings, and the legs were made of tags of tinsel tied on. It was a wonderful-looking creature, but Harvey was extremely sanguine of success with it, and practised throwing it on the lawn, very nearly hooking a cat which made a grab at it.

They had no opportunity of visiting the heath pool for some days, as the weather was very wet, but on the day before Christmas the wind had changed, and there was a bright, keen wind and a blue sky, which, at all events, promised a pleasant day, whether the pike were on the 'feed or not. Harvey was so sanguine about his fly that he would not take any other kind of tackle or bait, and Spencer was, as usual, only a looker-on. Peter had the donkey laden with the Berthon boat, properly folded up, and at ten o'clock the trio started. Sensible boys of that age do not put on any "side" with an inferior of the same age, unless the inferior presumes too much; and Peter being natural and at ease, and not on the look-out for any appearance of condescension in his companions, enjoyed their company as much as they enjoyed his. Spencer relied on him now and then for advice, or even physical help, in such slight difficulties as beset their progress over a rough country: being drawn, as delicate people often are, to one so much bigger and stronger than himself. Harvey had taken a liking to the young keeper, and was disposed to make a friend and confidant of him in a frank and healthy way.

They had great fun with the donkey. In descending the narrow lanes, it would keep so close to the hedges that the projecting ends of the boat would catch, and bring the animal up sharp, slewing his head round into the hedge. The moke appeared to think this was a practical joke on the part of the young men, and resented it each time by stubbornly refusing to proceed until it had to give way to superior force.

"I say," said Harvey, "I think we had better carry the donkey,

like the old man in the story books. It will be less trouble than hauling him along this way."

When they reached the heath, however, the ass became more tractable, and they soon reached the pool. It was a large, very shallow mere in the middle of a sandy heath, and for many yards from its margin it was so thickly covered with weeds that it was difficult to get the boat afloat. The Berthon was soon expanded, and Peter undertook to shove it out, and see if it were quite water-tight while, Harvey got his rod and tackle together. He was ready before Peter got back from his preliminary row, and thought he would try a cast from the shore. He made three or four very good casts, lengthening the line at each throw.



Then he hooked something—not, however, in front of him, but behind him—and that something was the donkey. The fly caught in its shoulder and stuck fast, no doubt giving a painful prick, for the ass, kicking up its heels and braying loudly, started off at a round pace. Harvey followed, letting out and reeling in line, just as if he were playing a fish. Spencer rolled on the ground in an agony of laughter, and Peter hurried ashore, and ran to head the donkey. Between Harvey's fear of breaking his rod or line, and Peter's fear of a kick—for the donkey, when brought to bay, kept waltzing round like a Catherine wheel, with his heels in the air—they were some time in recovering the fly. Finally it was extricated, and as the boat would only hold two, Peter started to row Harvey round the pool, and Spencer undertook to take care of the donkey. This he did by lying across both panniers, balancing himself on his stomach, and watching the fisherman, while the ass, whose peace of mind was restored, grazed quietly.

There was a good ripple on the water, and Harvey, kneeling in the stern, made cast after cast as the boat drifted quietly with the wind, or was kept stationary by Peter with the oars. The fly floated well on the surface, and its finery stood out well. It was too tempting to be long untouched. There was a rush of several feet along the water as a pike made for it, and after a nice bit of play, a fish of five pounds in weight was secured. After this, for one hour (from twelve to one) the fun was fast and furious. No sooner did the fly touch the water than there was a rush at it. Once two jack came at it at the same time, and struck each other. This caused a fight, and the swirling of the water showed the progress of the struggling fish for a minute or two. In that hour Harvey landed five pike from three to six pounds in weight, and then all at once the fish ceased running. Their dinner-hour was over, and they went completely off the feed, so that not another fish made its appearance. It was quite time to take a rest too, for the fish occupied a good deal of room

in so small a craft, and the fishermen's legs were cramped with inaction.

"I vote we go ashore, and take a stretch, P'enniless. Why, where is my cousin?"

Spencer was nowhere to be seen. They had been so busy with their fishing that they had not taken any notice of him, and now neither he nor the donkey was visible. For half a mile around there was barely cover enough to hide a dog.

"He can't have come to any grief," said Peter, "because the donkey has gone too."

"He's playing a joke on us. He will turn up by-and-bye. But he's taken the grub, and I am hungry and thirsty."

Now Spencer was by this time nearly at Wetaere, yet quite unconscious that he had left the pool. He was so comfortable across the panniers, that having nothing to do, he fell asleep, and the ass, pacing quietly along, presently took the road homewards, and reached its master's cottage on the edge of the village before Spencer awoke. When he did awake, he was thoroughly bewildered and rather frightened. Expecting a scolding from his cousin, he despatched a boy back with the donkey; and going home, he went into the library, and was soon comfortably seated in an armchair, and deep in the perusal of an interesting book.

* * * * *

That night a keen frost set in, and there was a slight fall of snow, which, coating the branches of the trees, showed a beautiful sparkling tracery in the morning sun. It was an ideal Christmas morning, and Peter started early and walked to Crostwich. He was to spend the day with Gerard at the Blackwood's, and a very pleasant day they had, although the thoughts of their last Christmas made them a little sad at times. Still they had much to be thankful for, and were content.

CHAPTER XXII.

Trapping ground vermin.

A VERY important branch of a keeper's duties consists in trapping those wild creatures which are usually termed "vermin," and whose habit it is to prey upon the game which the keeper preserves. These vermin, whether ground vermin, such as stoats, weasels, and cats, or winged, such as hawks, jays, crows, and magpies, wage incessant warfare against game, and the eggs of winged game, and the keeper wages a war of revenge against the depredators. It is essential that a keeper should be a good trapper, and yet in no branch of his duties does he oftener fail. Quadling was a very fair trapper, and had a good supply of traps. Peter knew but little of the science practically, except what he had picked up in occasional rounds with his father's keeper. These rounds had, however, familiarized him with the appearance and use of the various traps, and he had been a diligent student of many books on forest lore and game preserving, so that he was well primed as to the theory of trapping. His natural aptitude for such things stood him in good stead when it became his duty to look after much of the trapping, and Quadling was pleased to say that he knew a good deal of the art for one so young, and that by the time he was as old as Quadling himself, he would probably know as much.

And Peter found the wanderings about the woods and fields, the hedgerows, and the lake or river margins, the stealthy watch-

ings of the comings and goings of wild animals and birds, the matching of his cunning against theirs, and the successes and disappointments, very charming. Simply being out of doors at all times was a great enjoyment. The brushing against the sweet leaves, the fragrance of the woods, the odour of the earth, the mystery of the woodland life: tree and flower, and herb, animal, bird, and insect life, all gave him keen pleasure; and in his happiness in the woods he forgot his past loss and sorrow, and thought nothing of the subordinate position he at present held. Happy in the work and pleasure of the present, he cared but little for the past, and looked forward with hope to the future.

The autumn and winter is the great trapping season, and there was always plenty to do in this way. The seclusion of the woods round the decoy, the freedom from any disturbance by the guns, were as favourable to the abundance of vermin as they were of game.

One day Harvey came to Peter, and said,

"I say, Penniless, I wish you would take me round with you to set your traps and take them up."

"Very well, sir. I am going to set a number this afternoon, and I shall be pleased if you will help me."

So in due time the two young men set out, Peter carrying over his shoulder a bundle of steel traps, and in his hand a hammer, with one face broad and flat, and the other shaped like a hoe, the use of which will be seen presently.

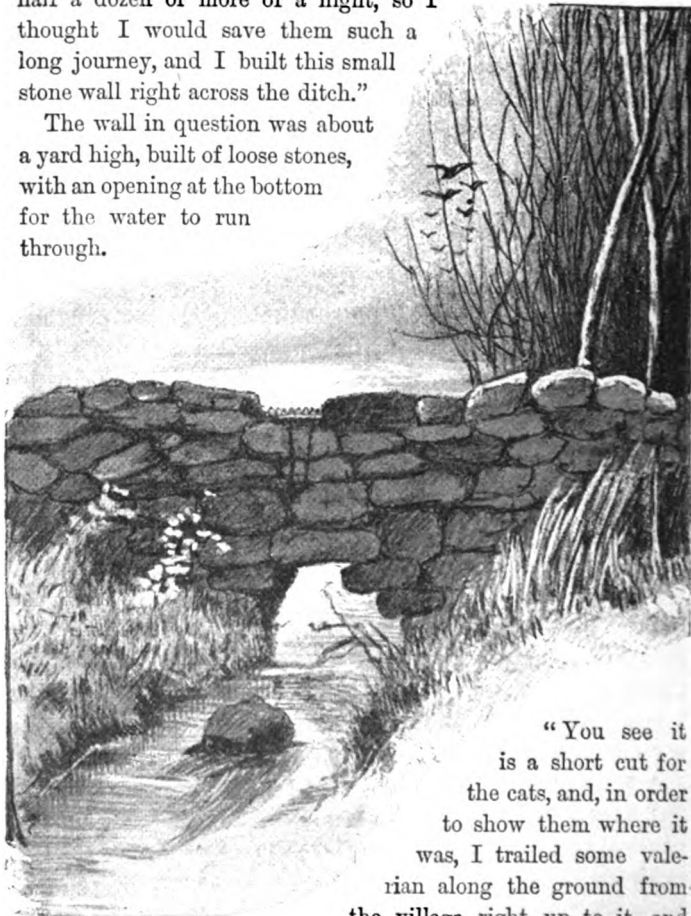
"I will just show you my great cat trap," said Peter.

"What a horrid shame to trap cats."

"Yes; I don't half like it, but they are the greatest thieves of all, if they once get the taste for it, and they are so knowing. It is not difficult to trap them, though, because they will walk along the tops of walls and places, when they can, instead of along the ground, so one knows where to set for them. Now, do you see this long dyke? It bounds the wood on the side next

the village, and the cats from the houses could not get into the wood except by going a long round. They always came, though, half a dozen or more of a night, so I thought I would save them such a long journey, and I built this small stone wall right across the ditch."

The wall in question was about a yard high, built of loose stones, with an opening at the bottom for the water to run through.



"You see it is a short cut for the cats, and, in order to show them where it was, I trailed some valerian along the ground from the village right up to it, and threw some pieces down on the other side, and in the water. Cats go mad after valerian, and after a few nights, I saw by the

tracks that the cats were using the bridge. Then I took two of the stones from the top, and in the openings left I set two steel traps, with long chains, so that when a cat was nipped in one, she should fall into the water and be drowned. See! one of the traps has gone! Perhaps it is hanging down the other side. Yes; and there is a cat in it, dead. And here is a rabbit, also dead. She was carrying the rabbit back with her when she got caught."

It was a shabby-looking Tom cat, of a large size. Peter disengaged the trap and reset it, and, adding the cat to his burden, he jumped the dyke, and entered the wood, followed by Henry.

"What do you do with the cats, Penniless?"

"I nail their heads up on the vermin rails, and if the skin is a good one, I keep it to make a rug some time. The bodies we give to the ferrets, but this cat I shall set as a bait for a fox."

"What, you sinner! You don't mean to say that you trap foxes! Why, that's murder!"

"The hounds can't come near this wood because of the decoy, and if a fox takes up his abode here, Quadling traps him and lets him go immediately. One such lesson's enough for the fox and he never comes into this particular wood again. There is a fox which has just made an earth not far from one of the pipes. He sprang on a duck the other day when it was in the reeds close by the side, and frightened a lot of fowl. So he must be driven away. These half-dozen large steel traps are for his benefit."

"I thought they were awfully large. Let me help you to carry them."

"No, thanks, I can carry them; but if you will take my air-gun and shoot the first rabbit you can see sitting still, I shall be glad. I want one for bait, for I shall set two traps. The foxes do not eat cats, but are awfully fond of rolling and rubbing against a dead cat, and if two or three traps are placed near he may get caught. There's a rabbit! Creep up to that tree, and you will get a shot."

The rabbit was about thirty yards away, and, with its ear pricked up, had just become aware that some one was near. Harvey slipped quietly away to the left, and Peter stood still *with his eyes shut*. He knew that the rabbit had caught sight of him, and was hesitating whether to fly or to trust to the concealment of the dead ferns. If it had seen Peter looking at it, it would have bolted, but not catching his eye, it hoped that it was unseen, and so remained still. Meanwhile, Harvey had gained the cover of the tree, and, resting the air-gun against it, he made a good shot, which rolled poor bunny over quite dead.

"Bravo, sir! That was a capital shot. Now we must move quietly, and talk only in whispers please, as we are not far from the pipes."

They soon reached a sloping bank, where the gravel was soft and smooth.

"Look, Mr. Harvey. I smoothed this out this morning, so that it would show any tracks, and here are the footprints of a fox, going and coming back. We will set the traps on each side of his path."

The cat was laid on the ground, a little to the left, and Peter proceeded, with the sharp end of the hammer, to cut three shallow oblong holes in the sod, within a foot or two of the cat, and around it. In each of these holes he placed a steel trap, and then carefully covered each over with pieces of grass, moss, and leaves, so that only a keen observer would have noticed that the ground had been disturbed. The traps were thus entirely hidden. On the other side of the fox's path, the rabbit was propped up in a sitting position, and three traps set about it in the same way. The fox would therefore have the choice of the rabbit for food, or the cat to rub against. Peter called Harvey's attention to the way in which he drove in the stakes to which the chains of the traps were attached. They were driven *obliquely* into the ground. When a fox is trapped, it jumps up, and endeavours to tear up the stake *vertically*, in

which direction it supposes it is thrust in; but the slanting set foils the creature, whose intelligence goes to a certain point and there stops.

After setting the fox traps, Peter proceeded to set a few rabbit traps to catch some which were commencing to burrow in the traverses. The small spring traps were set on the little heaps of gravel which the rabbits make in their track. A hole was cut as before, but the trap when set was sprinkled over with gravel until it was hidden. Harvey busied himself in smoothing this down over one trap, forgetting how light a touch was sufficient to spring the trap. The consequence was he got his finger nipped. He fortunately had a stout hedger's glove on, but he thought for a minute or two that his fingers were broken. He dared not shout out or exclaim, because of the ducks; but he went through a most expressive pantomime of disgust and rage, which sent Peter into a fit of silent laughter, which he could not control. As the pain abated, Harvey saw the joke too, and joined in the laughter; and then it was so comical to see each other apparently roaring with laughter and yet not uttering a sound, that they laughed more and more, and rolled on the ground in an agony of hilarity.

The next business was to visit a series of "dead-fall" traps, which were set along the side of a fence, half wall and half bank, along the foot of which, in a dry ditch, was a favourite haunt of stoats and weasels. There was a quarter of a mile or more of this wall bounding the southern side of the wood, and in its chinks and crannies were hiding-places innumerable of weasels, stoats, rats and mice. In the dry ditch were set dead-falls, box traps, and steel traps, and these shall be described in their turns in the next chapter. Meanwhile the two youngsters—master and man, though gentlemen both—sit down side by side, and munch their lunch with much contentment.

CHAPTER XXIII.

More trapping.—A novel bell-pull.—Catching a Fox.

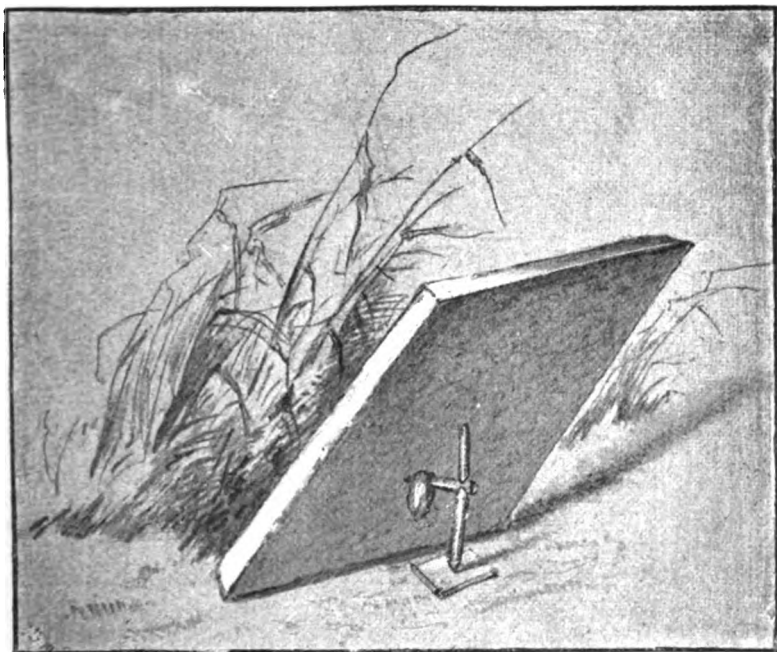
THERE are few boys who have not set traps for birds made of four bricks, the centre one propped up on two bits of stick, with a perch between the ends.

I and my companions were graceless enough, at a very early age, to set about a score of these each day of the winter holidays, and many were the luckless sparrows, tomtits, and robins which entered and were caught. The robins and the wrens we always set free, because they are God's cocks and hens. The tits, too, were generally set at liberty, but the sparrows we cooked and ate, and nothing has ever tasted so nice since as the half-burned sparrows, and scorched potatoes which used to accompany them.

But this is a digression—a memory brought up by the mention of the dead-fall trap.

In its simple and ordinary form, this is a flat slab of stone or heavy wood, one end being propped up at an angle of forty-five degrees by an arrangement of sticks, which can be easily disturbed. When they are so disturbed, the slab falls down, and by its weight kills the creature which has sprung the trap. It is set with three bits of stick, an upright one about a foot long and half an inch square, cut to a chisel edge on its upper end ; a cross-piece, having a slot in it to fit loosely on to the side of the upright, and a notch on the outer end ; and a sloping piece, with a notch at the upper end, and a chisel edge at the lower end. To set the trap, the slab is lifted up, and supported on the top end of the sloping piece, in the notch of which the top of the upright

fits. The cross-piece is fitted across the upright, with the end of the sloping piece catching in its notch. The bait, which may be any bit of offal, is hung on to the inner end of the cross-piece. When the weasel or stoat tugs at this, it disturbs the nice balance of the whole, and the slab falls and kills it.



DEADFALL.

Peter explained all this to Harvey by practical illustration.

"The traps are so cheap, and so easily set, that I have two or three score set in different parts, and I set them whenever I happen to pass one that is down. I dig holes under some of them, in the hope of catching some of the animals alive. I've

caught small birds alive, but the weasels and stoats generally die from fright, even if caught, quite unhurt, in box traps like this one."

The trap alluded to was set quite at the bottom of the ditch, and seemed at first to be simply a runnel for water. It was, however, a long oblong box, with a sliding door at each end, and a perforated zinc partition in the middle. The doors were held up by means of levers, the other ends of which were held down in the box by a kind of trigger. When this is disturbed, the door falls, and the stoat or weasel is a prisoner.

The way which Peter found the most killing was, however, the universal spring trap, set so as to go off with the slightest pressure, and placed close against a wall or bank. The bait, which may be a piece of a rabbit, or the "drawings" of fowls or game, should be fixed *above* the trap—say hung on a stick stuck into the crevices of the wall, or into a bank. The vermin jumping up and tugging at the bait, step on to the trap and are taken. There were several of these traps set along this particular wall, and dead weasels or stoats in some of them. These were taken out, and the traps reset, but in different places. After Peter had set a trap, he plastered up all the crevices in the wall, near the bait, with mud.

"What are you doing that for?" asked Harvey.

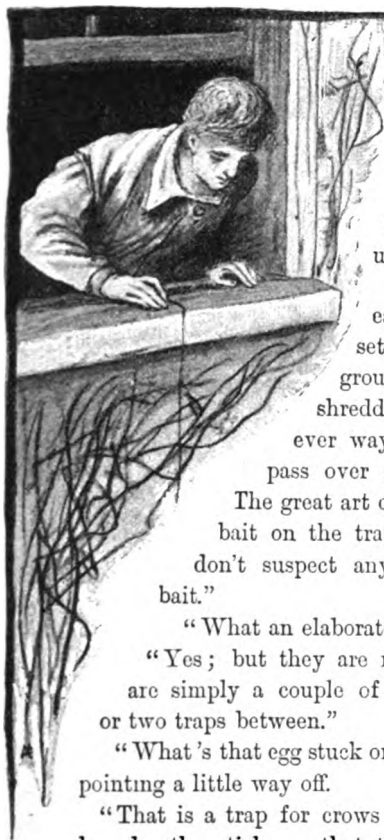
"The wall is full of mice, and they are apt to crawl along the stick and get at the bait. So are weasels, but if you stop up the holes in the wall close to the stick they can't get at it."

The next phase of trapping which Peter showed Harvey was, however, the most artistic. It was in one of the glades of the wood, and pointing to a spot a little aside, Peter said,

"Do you see anything out of the common there, sir?"

"No; nothing at all. Why, yes, the bushes are growing like the arms of a star-fish! How curious!"

"They are not growing; they are simply placed there in that order. You see there is an open space in the middle where the bait is placed, and from that there reach six arms, made of bits



of bushes and rubbish. So there are six lanes converging to the centre——”

Harvey looked at Peter at the word “converging,” but said nothing. It was a big word for an under-keeper.

“In the narrowest part of each of these lanes is a trap, set in a slight hole in the ground, and concealed with shredded grass and leaves. Which-ever way the stoat comes he must pass over a trap to reach the bait. The great art of trapping is not to put the bait on the trap, but *beyond* it. Vermin don’t suspect anything except just at the bait.”

“What an elaborate concern.”

“Yes; but they are not all so elaborate. Most are simply a couple of brushwood walls, with one or two traps between.”

“What’s that egg stuck on a stick for?” said Harvey, pointing a little way off.

“That is a trap for crows and magpies. The trap is close by the stick, so that they cannot get to the egg without touching the trap. Sometimes we put an egg on a stick just a foot or two out from the shore in very shallow water, and have a trap in the water. There are all sorts of dodges in trapping.”

“So it seems; but it is awfully interesting. I say, if that fox is caught, I should like to see it.”

"Very well, sir. It must be very early in the morning, then, before the ducks come back. It is moonlight to-night, and if you will tell me which your window is, I will throw stones at it and wake you at about five o'clock to-morrow morning."

"All right; but you will never wake me by throwing stones unless you smash the window. I will bore a hole through the sash, and pass a string through. I will then tie one end to my big toe, and let the other end hang down. But pull gently at first."

"Very well," replied Peter, laughing.

It was bright moonlight, frosty, and with a little snow on the ground, when Peter arrived beneath Harvey's window. He saw the string, which had a bit of white paper tied to it to attract attention. He did not like to pull it at first, and tried to attract attention by throwing gravel at the window. As this produced no response, he took hold of the string and gave it a slight tug. There was no reply, so he gave it a harder pull, and then a harder still: but still no result. Thinking that Harvey must have tied the end of it to a chair for a lark, Peter pulled very hard indeed. At this there was a loud roar and scuffle, which Peter heard plainly, and "in a jiffey" the window was thrown open, and Harvey's head appeared, crying,

"Hang it all! I told you to pull gently, and you've taken my toe clean off. Just chuck it up again, there's a good fellow, and I'll dress."

But Peter was speechless with laughter, which was bad manners for an under-keeper.

"It's all very well for you to laugh. First I dreamt that I was at the dentist's having a tooth pulled out, and then I dreamt that I was in a man-trap, and my leg was being torn off. I'll be down directly."

Very soon Harvey was on the terrace, saying, "I say, why didn't you pull gently? My toe's awfully sore."

"I pulled gently for ten minutes, and I thought you had fastened the end to a chair or something, to be pulled over and awake you with the noise."



A CAPTURED FOX.

"Faith! after that, I'll believe anybody when they say that I sleep soundly. How cold it is! Is there a fox in the trap, do you think?"

"I can't say, sir; but I hope so."

They hurried over the crisp grass of the park to the wood, and were not long in reaching the decoy. Creeping gently along, Peter in advance, they neared the trap. Peter raised his hand, and whispered, "There is a fox in. Come here, and you can see it." There was a fine fox, caught by the hind leg, and leaping and struggling madly to get free.

"Poor brute!" said Harvey. "What a handsome creature he is!"

The bright moonlight streaming between the bare branches, and reflected by the patches of fresh-fallen snow, made everything plainly visible. The poor fox bit savagely at the chain, at the stick, and even at his own leg, and then, after a fruitless struggle, lay down and began to lick the wounded leg. It was a piteous sight. The terror and rage of a wild animal caught in a trap can hardly be described. The fox struggled in silence; there was only the slight clanking of the chain, and the sound of his teeth and his footbeats to be heard.

"Shall you knock him on the head?" whispered Harvey.

"No, I don't want to kill it. I only want to frighten it, so that it may go somewhere else. We must let it loose."

"Foxes bite, don't they?" said Harvey, suggestively.

"Yes, I don't much like tackling it, with the chance of a bad bite. One might get hydrophobia. I think we must cut a long forked stick and hold him down with it."

They searched about and soon found a forked branch, which they trimmed with their pocket-knives. Peter then advanced towards the fox, which struggled desperately at his approach, and snapped viciously at him with his teeth. It was with some difficulty that he got the furious creature's neck between the fork, and succeeded in pressing it to the ground.

"Now, if you will hold the fox down, Mr. Harvey, and don't let him slip, I will open the trap."

Harvey held the stick with all his might while Peter pushed the spring down, and opened the jaws of the trap.

"Now let him go, sir."

Harvey withdrew the stick, and jumped aside. The fox went away, as the Yankees say, like greased lightning.

"There! he will never trouble the decoy again," said Peter.
"Hush! there come some of the ducks back."

As he spoke, a lot of fowl wheeled overhead, and alit splashing on the lake in front of the decoy, while the two youngsters crept quietly homewards.



CHAPTER XXIV.

A hard frost.—A frost-bite.—Clearing the decoy-pipes.

ABOUT ten o'clock that morning the sky became overcast, and the snow began to fall. At first a few large scattered flakes descended slowly, as if hesitating which particular spot of earth to select for a resting-place. Then they came down thicker and faster, and all day long, and all the succeeding night, until earth and tree-branches each bore a goodly load. When the morning broke there was six inches of snow on the ground. When the fall ceased, the frost came hard and strong, and during the day, there being no wind, and the lake calm and still, a thin sheet of ice formed over it everywhere, except in the bays, where the ducks kept the water in motion.

"We shall have to break the ice to-night, Peter," said Quadling, "or by morning there will be no open water for the ducks."

"Very well, Mr. Quadling."

"You won't find it very well, my lad, if the frost goes on as it bids fair to go on. The ice-breaking is the hardest part of the decoyman's life, and knocks him up sooner than anything. One can't help getting wet, and the cold is bitter, so that one often can't feel that one has either hands or feet. You will have to help me to-night, Peter, and mind you keep as dry as you can, and that you don't get frost-bitten."

"All right," replied Peter, "what time shall we go to the 'coy?'"

"Not too early in the night, or it will freeze again after we leave. You be ready to start about three o'clock in the morning. I shall be up."

Accordingly, at three o'clock, Peter dressed and went into the kitchen, where he found the keeper pulling on his thick water-boots, reaching to the thighs. Peter already had a similar pair on. It was a bright starlight night as they left the cottage, and the frost was sharp and the cold piercing. As Peter drew his breath through his nostrils, they seemed to freeze together, and one had need of a sound set of teeth to be able to stand breathing through the mouth.

They strode through the crisp, crackling snow, which weighted the wood with a heavy silence. It was curious how absolutely free from the usual woodland noises at night the plantations now were. Nothing broke the stillness except the occasional soft thud of a mass of snow slipping off some branch which could sustain its weight no longer.

When they reached the lake the keeper took a pebble, and threw it on the bay. It rebounded, and went rattling along the ice.

"There, I thought it would all be 'laid.'" (East Anglian for frozen over.) "We must go to the boathouse, and break a path from it to the decoys. Come along, we have no time to lose."

Quadling stood at the bow of the boat, armed with a long pole, and broke the ice in front, while Peter pushed it on with the oars. A "plodge" with the pole would break up a yard or two of the thin ice, and by swaying to and fro sideways, and so making the boat rock considerably and cause undulations, much more of the ice on each side would be broken. The detached pieces were thrust under the edge of the ice remaining on each side out of the way.

"This reminds me," said Peter, "of the ice-boat used on the Shropshire Canal. It is a long barge, with a hand-rail running down the middle. A party of men range themselves on both sides of this rail, and sway about to make the barge roll, while powerful horses drag it through the ice."

"Ay, that's easier work than this."

When they reached the first bay, they proceeded first of all to break the ice in the pipe, and drag the pieces out: then they broke the ice for a space of twenty or thirty yards in front of the pipe, dragging and clearing all the floating pieces under the edge of the ice left unbroken. Peter worked hard, as a matter of course, but he could not keep himself warm, the cold was so intense. The poles they used were soon coated, and looked like large icicles. This coating could not easily be broken off, and added considerably to the weight of the poles.

From the first bay they moved to the second, and repeated the operation there.

"Just keep still a few minutes, Peter, and you will hear it freeze."

"Hear it freeze!" said Peter, in surprise.

"Yes. Now listen; and you can hear better if you put your ear to the gunwale of the boat."

Peter did so, and could distinctly hear on all sides a musical tinkle. This was caused by the formation of the ice crystals. If you watch water being frozen, you will see that the first step is the formation of crystals, little and big, which shoot into being instantaneously, and cross and recross each other until the surface is covered. In the stillness of this keen winter's night, the sound caused by the multitudinous creation of ice crystals was very audible, and very curious. Peter held the lanterns they carried close to the water, and exclaimed,

"Why, the side of the boat is edged with a fringe of the ice crystals already, and we haven't been still five minutes. It is a poor look-out, surely, to attempt to keep all the bays open."

"If the frost goes on like this it is ; but if they are not kept open, good-bye to the decoying until the frost goes. We must try and keep one open, anyway."

While they were clearing out the last bay, Peter had occasion to blow his nose ; but was greatly surprised to find that his nose had no more feeling than a lump of ice.

"I say, Mr. Quadling, all sensation has gone out of my nose," he cried, becoming alarmed.

Quadling's reply was to seize a handful of the snow which had accumulated on the boat, and to rub Peter's nose violently with it.

"I say, that will make it worse !" spluttered poor Peter.

"No it won't. You will get frost-bitten unless we rub it warm again. That is the worst of having such a thin nose. Your nose is fit only for a gentleman's. I've noticed that when the sun shines on your face, one can almost see through your nostrils. They grow as pink as the ears of a rabbit, with the sun shining through them."

Now, if Peter had any personal vanity at all, it was that he was proud of a handsome nose, and now his pet member was being treated in the roughest fashion by the horny hands of the keeper. Notwithstanding his fear of being frost-bitten, Peter could not help laughing at the comical situation—two men standing in a boat, one rubbing the other's nose.

"Tell me when any feeling comes back to it, Peter.

"It is beginning to ache frantically now."

"That's right. There is no more danger. This has been one of the coldest nights I ever was out in. But hark to the whistle of wings! The ducks are coming back. We must go."

So they turned homewards, Peter rubbing his nose all the way, and afterwards looking at it with much solicitude in his little looking-glass. It soon got all right, and although he was out on many another cold night, he never had any recurrence of such a thing.

CHAPTER XXV.

Incidents of the frost.

THE frost went on, and night after night either Quadling or Peter, and often both, spent hours in striving to keep open water in front of the pipes. The labour was great, but the returns from the decoy were also great, and the keepers were anxious to keep the pipes at work. The fowl were concentrated in the small spaces kept open, and were easily decoyed. Their numbers were reinforced by constant arrivals from the far north, where the winter was of exceptional rigour. Quadling said that he had not had such a successful season for many years. Twice a day he worked the pipes, and, owing to the complete absence of wind, any one of them could be worked. Each time he secured two or three dozen ducks, and between the ice-breaking at night, the decoying during the day, the entering the takes in the decoy-books, and the sending the fowl to the dealers, there was no idleness possible, and Peter's studies suffered considerably. It needed extreme resolution, after a hard day's work, and with the prospect of being up at three o'clock, to sit down to an hour's study, and game as he was, and determined to learn, Peter often fell asleep over his book.

The frost still continued. Lakes and pools were alive with skaters; but no skaters were allowed on the decoy lake. At last Quadling said,

"We must give up all but one pipe, Peter. The labour is too

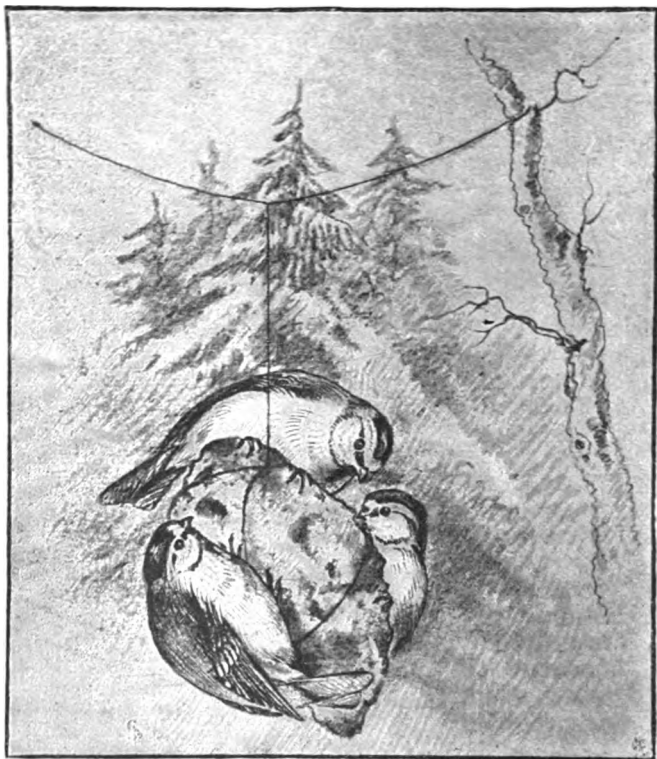
great. What air there is, is from the north-west, and if any wind comes, it will be from that quarter, so we will try and keep the north-west pipe open, and leave the others. We can't help it, and we have already made this the best season for five years."

So the ice was allowed to claim all the pipes except the north-west one, and for two hours every night, or rather early morning, the keepers worked hard to keep the water free. Day by day the circle of water became smaller, and in the daytime this small space was literally crammed with fowl. Save the sea, or the rivers, it was the only space of open water in the countryside. Many curious incidents happened. Ducks were frozen to the ice, and secured at night. No less than ten water-hens and coot were caught in this way in one week, and numbers of others must have escaped observation and perished miserably.

A fox was found frozen fast by its tail on the edge of the ice, whither it had ventured after the ducks, and when found it was quite dead, although not more than eight hours could have elapsed since it was so curiously trapped. High up the first stream, an otter was found frozen in between some tree-roots, and a heron frozen in a shallow.

It was a bad time for the hares, which could not easily make their way through the deepening and hard snow. Their tracks were, of course, easily seen, and followed, and as they continually ventured into the roads they were often run down by boys and men. The sharp outer crust of snow cut the legs of the hares as they broke through it, and they were easily taken. Game of all kinds ventured into the cottage gardens, and up to the very doors. The keeper's cottage was besieged by birds of all kinds. A table was placed out, and crumbs and corn placed on it each morning. A crowd of birds came to the feast; thrushes, black-birds, robins, tits, sparrows, and most of the woodland birds. The only disagreeable birds were the robins, which always tried to fight and drive the others away. All other birds fed amicably side by side. Peter strung some pieces of fat on a string and

stretched it between two trees for the delectation of the tits, which would cling to the fat, and peck and swing about in a comical manner. Besides the game in the garden, and the birds



THE TOMTITS' FEAST.

on the table, vermin, winged and ground, ventured on to the keeper's premises.

As it was holiday-time for Gerard Longley, he spent much of it (after the departure of Harvey and Spencer) with his brother,

and it was a great delight to him to lie hid somewhere, and "pot" crows, magpies and jays, stoats and weasels, with Peter's air-gun. The voracious grey crows would come half a dozen at the time, and perch on the garden fence, or the adjacent trees, even venturing occasionally on to the table.

The intercourse of the two brothers which had been somewhat interrupted while Spencer and Harvey were at the Hall, was now close and frequent. Quadling and his wife were always glad to see Gerard, and were indeed rather proud that their under-keeper had a relation who was doing so well in the world. Quadling sometimes said to his wife,

"That master Gerard is a clever chap, and he will make his learning useful to him. Take my word for it, he will get on, and in a few years he will be quite a gentleman, and no one would know he was half-brother to a keeper."

"Peter has a fancy for books," replied the wife. "When I am tidying his room, I see books of learning, and bits of paper about."

"Tut, tut, wife! Peter has no time to study. I must say I never saw any one take so well to his proper work, and keep so steady at it. He has only one fault. He fancies he knows a lot of farming, and he is always talking about farming with the labourers, and with the farmers, particularly Mr. Knox, who encourages him a little too much, I think. Still, I can't object, for he does his duty to me. Only, if he does take to learning, or farming, he will be a good keeper spoiled."

By which it will be seen that no suspicion of Peter's original status had crossed Quadling's mind. So much for dress, and a simple, plain manner. Peter had fallen very naturally into the style of speech of his neighbours, and had lost the constant sense of watchfulness against himself, which at first characterized him in his new occupation. It was only with Harvey, who was a kindred spirit, that he was likely to betray himself; and, to speak the truth, Harvey had a slight suspicion that Peter was

to a certain extent, sailing under false colours—not in a dishonourable sense, but of necessity. But he was well disposed towards Peter, and had a mind to be a friend to him; so he made no awkward enquiries, and respected his secret, if he had one.

But all this time the frost has been continuing, and occasionally there were falls of snow.



CHAPTER XXVI.

A crowd of fowl—Successful decoying.

ONE morning Peter came in to breakfast, and reported that the open water (now very small indeed) was crammed with a greater quantity of fowl than he had yet seen.

"Then we will all go down by-and-bye and decoy them, and Mr. Gerard can go with us. I have no doubt it will be a fine sight."

About eleven o'clock they crept along the traverses in single file, Quadling leading, then Peter, then Gerard, and then the dog—all except the latter holding bits of burning turf to kill their scent. Slowly and solemnly, with bent figures (except the dog, who, happily for him, did not need to stoop), the procession reached the screens. Peter gave one of the flat pieces of wood stuck into the screens a twist, and so opened a peep-hole for Gerard, whom he stationed there, with a caution not to stir a step, not to cough or sneeze, and not to raise his head above the screens.

"And hang it all!" replied Gerard, in a whisper, "I want to do everything I mustn't do, of course. I want to blow my nose dreadfully."

"Hush! you mustn't *blow* it! You must *wipe* it."

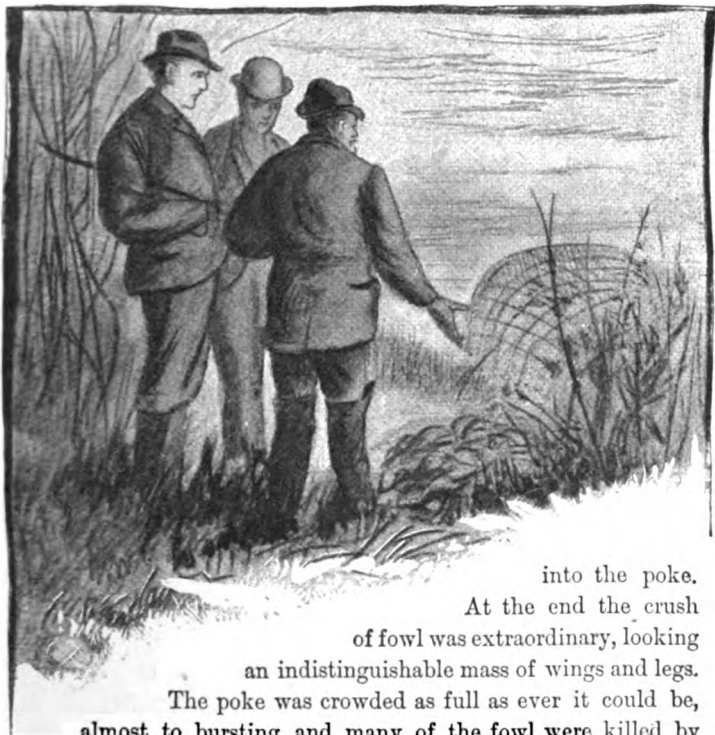
This made Gerard laugh; but at that instant he caught a glimpse of the ducks, and forgot his rebellious desires at the sight. After that he kept his eye glued to the peep-hole in intense excitement.

The open space of water was not ten yards across, but it was all in a ferment with fowl. There was not room for them to swim about without elbowing each other. Mallard, widgeon, teal, and pochards hustled each other in their movements after the food at the bottom. Nor was this all. On the ice around the edge of the open water sat scores more, preening themselves, sleeping, and often sliding into the water off the uneven ice hillocks in an unpremeditated manner. The appearance of the congregation of fowl might be best described as *seething*, there were so many together.

After gazing at the scene for awhile in astonishment, for even Quadling had not before seen such a sight, the latter began to decoy. Peter lay down behind a screen, close by the mouth of the pipe, ready to frighten the ducks up as soon as Quadling gave the signal by a wave of his arm, thus dispensing with the pause occasioned by the keepers running back for the purpose.

At the first momentary appearance of the dog, the clatter of the fowl ceased, and they all turned enquiringly towards the pipe. At the next appearance some of the more curious or bolder birds swam straight into the pipe, followed by a large number of others. As the dog proceeded in and out of the pipe the numbers of the following fowl increased, until it seemed as if there were as many in as the pipe would hold. A large proportion were pochards, which would be sure to double back, but there were plenty of other fowl. Peter wondered why Quadling delayed so long in giving the signal, as there were far more fowl in the pipe than could be forced into the poke net. But Quadling knew what he was about. He was trying to lead the better fowl in advance of the pochards, and he, to some extent, succeeded. After pausing to peep through a screen at the advancing host, he raised his arm. Peter immediately showed himself at an opening, and then a scene ensued that baffles description. The ducks rose *en masse*, and flew up the pipe, quickly concentrating into a struggling mass, pushing, flying, swimming, and

struggling up the pipe. Most of the pochards flew back, but some were so beaten down and overpowered by the other fowl struggling up, that they were actually forced with the crowd



into the poke.

At the end the crush

of fowl was extraordinary, looking

an indistinguishable mass of wings and legs.

The poke was crowded as full as ever it could be, almost to bursting, and many of the fowl were killed by the crush while within the pipe, while numbers, having got as far up as they could, turned and made their escape. Quadling detached the mouth of the poke net, and actually could not bend it to close it until several of the outermost ducks had been extricated and killed.

Quadling and Peter were busy wringing the necks of the fowl

when Gerard left his post and came up. All three were in a state of great excitement, and even the staid old dog was excited. He was too well trained to bark, but gave vent to his satisfaction by a variety of silent and absurd gambols, varied by the bringing back of ducks that managed to wriggle a few yards before giving up the ghost.

"This is the finest take I ever had," said Quadling, counting the slain.

"You can't decoy another lot," remarked Gerard; "for when the pochards went back, I saw all the ducks take flight—a regular crowd of them."

"Never mind. I don't care if I don't get another duck. We have done so well this season that it will make up for many bad ones. Now both of you must help to carry the fowl; and we shall have to make two journeys, I can see."



CHAPTER XXVII.

The decoy "laid"—Skating—Trimmering through the ice—Pike-chasing—
Eel-spearing.

AFTER the disturbance of the fowl by the escape of the pochards, the majority of those which had flown away did not return, but stayed in the sea or the tidal river. The water, which during the day had been kept open by the movements of the birds, was now still, and in a very short time a sheet of ice had formed over it. When Peter went down at three o'clock the following morning, armed with his pole, the first blow simply made a star on the ice, it was already so thick. Half-an-hour's vigorous work enabled him only to break a few yards. He did not like to give in, as he had never heard of the decoy being absolutely closed through frost; and he did not wish that it should now happen through any fault of his. So he pounded away with might and main, and the sound of his blows resounded through the dark night.

Mrs. Quadling, happening to awake, distinctly heard them and, pitying poor Peter in what she thought his hopeless task, woke her husband. After listening for awhile, he said,

"Well, if he has to knock like that to break the ice, he had better give it up. Suppose, my dear, you slip something on, and run down to the 'coy, and tell him so."

Mrs. Quadling was very indignant at this suggestion, which she took as being made in earnest, for, as Quadling said, "Women

never can see a joke. Well, old woman, let Peter work until he is tired. I am sleepy."

"Oh, you wretch! You know you have said yourself he will never give in, and it is a shame to let him break his heart over the ice like that."

"Oh, dear me! I suppose I must get up then, and go and see after him. There is no peace for the wicked when a woman wants her way."

And Quadling good-naturedly got up and dressed, and turned out into the keen air to find Peter.

"There, my lad, that will do. The ice is too strong for us. We must give it up, and let the decoy close itself up for a time. It can't be helped."

"Faith, I am glad you came, Mr. Quadling. I was getting tired, and disheartened. The pieces freeze together again as fast as I break them."

"Then we will let Jack Frost have his way. Get you home to bed, and sleep as long as you like. It is holiday-time now."

Peter was not long in turning in, and being at liberty to lie abed, did so for once, making up for many nights of insufficient rest and sleep.

It was indeed holiday-time for the keepers. The fowl had left the frozen decoy, and trapping was out of the question. There was no shooting going on. Poachers were frozen out for once, for their tracks would have been so visible that they forbore to make any. So beyond the odd jobs which had been laid aside for such intervals of leisure there was little to do, and Peter had ample time to amuse himself by study, in which he had Gerard's assistance, or to amuse Gerard in any out-door way that might occur to them.

The decoy might now be skated upon without fear of disturbing fowl, for there were none to disturb. For the first time for very many years the ring of skates resounded over the lake. Many portions of it were of clear good ice, on which skating was

a delight ; and Peter and Gerard, with the doctor, the curate, Mr. Knox, and a few other privileged ones, spent many merry hours in racing and chasing each other, attempting intricate figures, and generally enjoying to the full all the pleasures of so delightful an art.

One day Gerard, while skating over a very shallow part of the lake where the ice, though thick, was beautifully clear, so that he could see to the bottom, observed a good-sized pike under the ice. It moved away as he approached it, but soon stopped again. Peter coming up, they began in fun to chase it hither and thither, heading it whenever it attempted to get into deeper water. After keeping up this game for about half an hour, the pike began to show signs of weariness, and it was only by striking the ice with their sticks that they could get it to move. At last, and much to their astonishment, it turned belly upwards and lay against the ice dead beat, just as if it had been played with a rod and line.

"Keep watch over it while I run up to the cottage for a hatchet," said Peter ; and, throwing off his skates, he ran as fast as he could, returning with the necessary weapon.

"Has he moved, Jerry ?"

"Yes, he made a dash twice ; but here he is, belly up."

"Hit the ice hard and stun him," suggested Knox.

Peter did so, and the concussion seemed to stun the pike, so that it did not move while Peter hacked a hole through the ice and got it out. It was a nice jack, about seven pounds in weight. When it was laid out on the ice it quickly froze quite stiff.

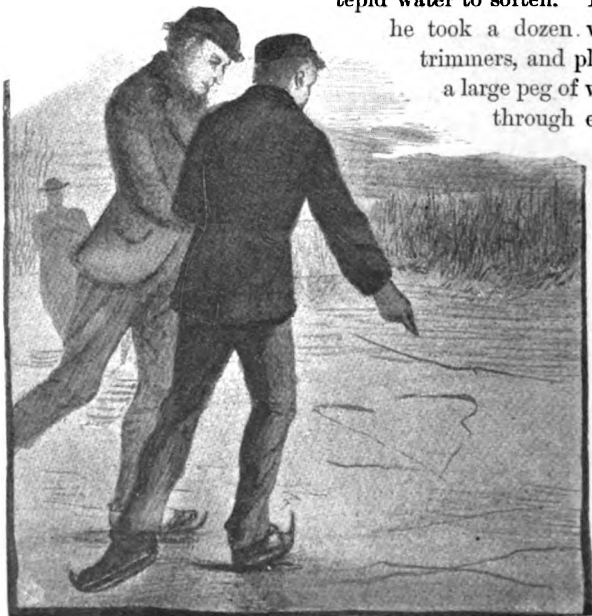
After this exploit the two youngsters, with their friend Knox, kept a sharp look out for pike beneath the ice, and by using a long-handled stonebreaker's hammer, they were able, after a cautious approach, to stun several pike without first chasing them and wearying them out. Others they chased as they had done the first one. The curate strongly objected to this amuse-

ment, as it caused so many holes and rough places to be made in the ice, but the others did not heed his expostulations, and skated about with bent figures, eagerly scanning the depths below them in search of their prey. Then, when the cry, "Here is one!" rang out over the ice, the others would scurry to the spot, and do their best to slay and capture.

Said Peter one day, "If I could get some bait, I would set some trimmers."

The others laughed him to scorn. Set trimmers on a frozen lake! What an absurd idea! But Peter knew what he was about, and having, by good luck, discovered a whole shoal of small roach frozen into the solid ice, he dug them carefully out one by one, and placed them in tepid water to soften. Then

he took a dozen wood trimmers, and placed a large peg of wood through each.



CHASING PIKE UNDER THE ICE.

The next step was to cut holes in the ice. ("More holes?" groaned the curate.) The lines were baited and the trimmers set *edgerays*, the long pegs being placed across the holes so that the trimmers were in the position of wheels, with the pegs for axles. On the day they were set, the keenness of the frost had abated, and there was, in fact, a slight thaw, so that the holes did not freeze up. The skaters kept away from the immediate vicinity of each hole, watching them from a distance. The curate was the first to notice one of the trimmers spinning round, and, calling the others, they watched the line run out, and, after giving the pike time to tire itself, they hauled it out. In the course of that short January day they caught seven good-sized pike in their trimmers. Shudder not, oh anglers! The pike were safe from thy wiles, and yet must be destroyed, for the welfare of the decoy.

On the following day they tried the same little game, but the frost having returned, their lines froze fast, and although the baits were taken by the pike, the latter succeeded in cutting the lines against the sharp edges of the ice and escaped.

Peter, however, had noticed that the eels came in great quantities to the holes, in search of air, and the next experiment was this:—A space of ice was broken (after infinite labour) over a place where the water was shallow, but the mud was known to be deep. In two or three hours after, Peter returned to the spot with an eel spear, the first thrust of which broke through the skin of new formed ice. This experiment was extremely successful. The eels had rapidly collected in the mud under the broken portion in great numbers, and were easily taken out with the spear. Enough eels were taken in this way for home consumption for some days, and for presents, and then, as the process was not very exhilarating or exciting, and was extremely dirty, it was voted slow, and abandoned.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The snow-laden woods—Punt-shooting—Cardboard decoy ducks—A dreadful
sell.

THE snow had for some time laid in heavy masses on the trees, bending the boughs and branches down with its weight, and in many instances breaking them off. The forms of snow wreaths were extremely fantastic, and Gerard was always calling attention to some extraordinary form, as they walked together on the beaten paths, or fainter tracks through the woods.

Whenever a wind sprung up it would shake down many of these accumulations, and free the trees, but some of the smaller ones, which had been much bent with the load, never recovered their straightness.

"As the days lengthen does the cold strengthen," says the proverb, and it certainly was so now. Skating began to pall; so did the sight of the snow-bound woods, and the glaring white waste of fields, so that it was a relief to walk on the beach and look out to sea, by way of resting the eyes.

"Come, Peter," said Gerard, one day, "this is getting slow. Can't you devise some other amusement? Quadling is happy with his pipe, and by his fireside, but I want some excitement."

"What do you say to duck-shooting? I can get a punt and big gun. There is one belonging to the Hall, which has been lent to a man in the village, and I can have it at any time."

"Done!" replied Gerard. "Let us get it at once. But I notice that there are not very many fowl even on the mud banks up the river, and there are always one or two punts after them; and the punters don't come back with very many."

"The fowl have mostly gone away to the southward. I expect there are plenty at Harwich, and the estuaries of the other rivers from there to the Thames. However, we will try."



PUNT SHOOTING.

The punt was accordingly procured, the gun cleaned, and on a bright starlight night the brothers started up the river with the tide, to see what they could do. The flood had just begun to make, and they paddled up with it, keeping eyes and ears open to detect the presence of any fowl on the mud-banks to right and left of them. They often heard them overhead out of sight, and saw parties of two or three on the mud; but at a great distance, and it did not seem worth while discharging the small cannon in their bows at so few. They went on for two or three miles without getting a shot, except at a mallard, which Peter shot with his shoulder gun as it was flying overhead. The boom of another punt-gun behind them told them that some

one else had been more lucky in getting a shot, but with what success they did not know.

They pulled back somewhat disappointed, and very cold, and as they sat together over their simple supper in Peter's room, Gerard said,

"I have read in American books of sport, that the gunners there cut shapes of ducks in cardboard, and stick them in the mud to decoy the genuine articles into alighting there. The man hides close by, and waits for a shot. What do you say to doing that?"

"Capital!" exclaimed Peter; "and I know the very place to do it. Just at the bend of the river—about a mile up, where it is very wide—there is a high mud-bank, which is always the last to be covered. Within shot of it is a rotten old barge stranded there. Suppose we set the decoys on the bank, and hide in the punt behind the barge."

"Agreed. Where can we get some cardboard to make the shapes of?"

"We will ask Quadling in the morning. I say, here is a calculation I have got into an awful muddle over. I started to ascertain how many cubic feet of timber there are in some oaks that have been cut down. I've done it three times, with a different result each time."

"But what have you to do with the timber?"

"Nothing much, Jerry; only the agent is coming to look at it, and I want to know something about it for private reasons."

"Oh, all right. Do you want to be a land agent? I thought it was a farmer you were going to be."

"I'm going to be whatever I can, Jerry. But never mind that. Just check my figures, and tell me where I am wrong, there's a good fellow."

However, Peter's studies will not be so interesting to my readers as his amusements and keeper's life. I only refer to such things from time to time to indicate that Peter was bend-

ing all his energies to acquire practical information for future use, the while he was doing his duty in his lesser station.

On the morrow they had a regular hunt for pieces of cardboard, out of which to construct their ducks. Boxes of different kinds were appropriated, and the thin wood of packing cases, and even the backs of old books. Gerard made a drawing on a piece of paper of a duck, full size, and from this pattern they cut out about a dozen shapes, the outline of which was life-like. These shapes were supported on cleft sticks, which were meant to be stuck in the mud. Mr. and Mrs. Quadling looked on with great amusement, and some chaffing.

Never mind, Mr. Quadling," said Gerard. "When we come back with a sackful of ducks you won't laugh at us, I know."

The decoys were carefully and secretly carried down to the punt, and they rowed up to the scene of operations. The mud was very soft, and to avoid sinking into it, Peter put on a pair of mud-pattens. These are simply oblong pieces of board attached to the feet by leather loops, and answer precisely the same purpose as snow-shoes do for the savage, who traverses soft snow with them.

Peter soon stuck his dozen decoys in the mud, looking different ways, so that the broadsides of some should be seen from every side. Of course, edgeways they looked nothing but sticks, but sideways, and at a little distance, they looked remarkably real. The brothers were much pleased with their appearance as they rowed off, and then pushed the punt over the mud to the old barge, in the shadow of which they rested. They lay down, side by side, for the sake of warmth, and waited and watched in the faint starlight for signs of fowl, conversing in low whispers,

"I say, Peter, I don't think any ducks are coming."

"Wait a little longer. It is early yet. The tide is making up quick, and the rest of the mud-flats will soon be covered

Then the ducks will come here. Look! What is that dark thing in the water? I do believe it is a punt."

"So it is, and it is coming nearer to us. I say, what a lark, Peter! I do believe the fellow is stalking our decoys."

"So he is, and we are in the line of the shot! Lie down, and keep your head below the level of the barge. That will keep any stray shots off."

After a few moments of anxious suspense, the stillness was broken by the unearthly roar of the gun in the strange punt, and the shot came skipping and ricocheting all about them, plenty striking the barge, under the cover of which they crouched. Then all was silent again, and the brothers peeped out to see what the stranger would do. They saw him land on the mud, and pull his punt out after him. His dog was already among the decoys (nearly all of which were laid low by the shot), and the master soon followed.

They saw him stoop down and pick up a shape. Then he picked up another; and then they saw him dance about with rage, and heard him utter very loud and strong language. Then, after looking about him, evidently to see who could have set them, he came towards the barge. Peter thought it time to anticipate his remarks, and accordingly arose and asked him what he meant by shooting his decoys, and nearly shooting himself into the bargain.

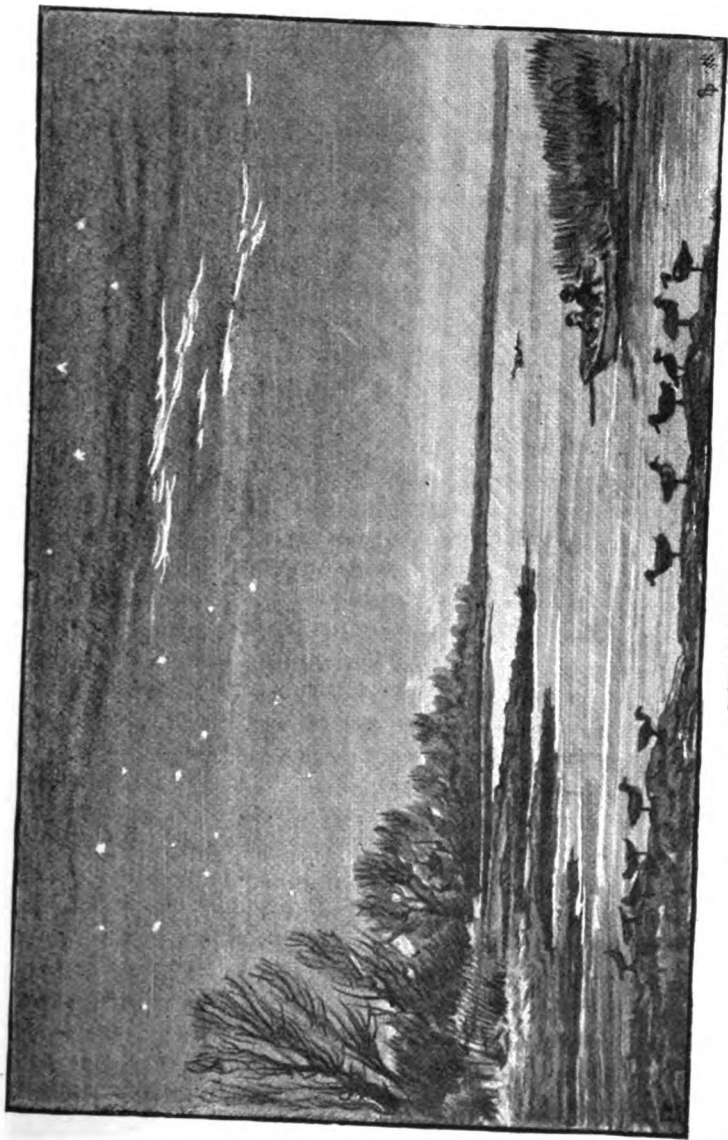
"I see that's Mr. Penniless by your height," replied the man. "That's a nice trick to play upon a fellow! I have wasted a pound of shot on your blessed paper birds."

"We weren't playing a trick on you. We meant to play a trick on the fowl, but you have spoiled our little game."

"Well, it can't be helped, Mr. Penniless. It's lucky I didn't shoot you. So we will say no more about it, if you please."

"All right; but I suppose there's no more chance of a shot to-night."

"No; all the ducks seem to have gone to the south'ard."



CARDBOARD DECOY DUCKS.

"Then we had better leave the shapes where they be, Jerry, and go home to be laughed at by Mr. Quadling."

So they returned, having had enough of wild-fowl shooting for the present. The dodge they tried, though unsuccessful on the present occasion, is very successful at times, not only in America but in England.



CHAPTER XXIX.

Sailing on skates.

MRS. QUADLING was extremely sarcastic about cardboard decoy ducks, and Quadling's good-natured chuckles were even more irritating. The two sought refuge in the columns of the *Field*. This paper regularly taken by Mrs. Spencer, and towards the end of each week was sent down to the keeper's house. It was as of not uncut, as unless there were gentlemen staying at the there was no one there to read it. To Quadling it was, of course, useful, but to Peter, it was a source of keen enjoyment on a Saturday night, or a Sunday, its perusal was a constant task.

When Peter and Gerard retired to their own domain, they did rather early, they took the *Field* with them, and dividing it into portions, sat down to read for a little before turning in.

"I say, Peter," cried Gerard, "here is the very thing."

"The very thing for what, Jerry?"

"Why, for amusement on the ice. You have, of course, seen the ice-yachts which they have on American waters, and they go as fast as an express train, when they get a fair stretch with a beam wind."

"Yes; but you can't have one here; there isn't room

You would knock the ends of the lake out before you could turn."

"The ends of the lake! What bosh you do talk sometimes! I don't mean to suggest an ice yacht; but I do say that we might rig ourselves with a sail, and sail on skates."

"Oh; I say, how can that be done? Would you hook the halyards on to your nose?"

"No, I am not joking. Here's a fellow writing to the *Field* all about it, and it seems easy enough. Just read the letter, and look at the figure. Why shouldn't we make a couple of sails like that?"

The letter referred to was as follows:—

"SIR,

"In the interest of the skating community, I venture to trouble you with a few lines on the subject of an amusement on the ice, which I believe is quite novel in England, and from which I have derived so much enjoyment during the late frosts, that I cannot but wish my brother skaters should have the same pleasure when next we are favoured with suitable weather. I claim no originality for the invention, as, though hitherto unknown in England, I believe it has for many years been in use in Norway

"Sailing on skates is the subject of my communication. As an exercise it offers all the excitement of great speed, combined with the interest which the necessity for skill, strength, and presence of mind entails. The sail is made of a piece of unbleached calico of oblong form, with slightly rounded ends. Each end is attached (either by a lacing, as in the case of a cutter's topsail, or by a wide hem, such as is common in window blinds) to a light stick or yard, of sufficient length to stretch the ends of the sail. These sticks I call the small yards. The sail is spread by a central mainyard, long enough to project nine inches beyond the sail at both ends. This must be strong, stiff, and light, and must be fitted at each extremity with two stout eyes, smooth on the inside. A piece of stout line (afterwards

called 'lanyard'), is made fast to the centre of each of the small yards, and rove through the eyes at the ends of the mainyards, then round the small yard, and through the eye again, finishing up with a 'figure of eight seizing' round the main and small yards at the points where they cross one another. One lanyard is first rose, and made fast; the other is then used as a purchase to strain the sail taut. The use of the rounded ends to the sail is now seen, as the small yards buckle when the strain of the purchase comes on them. To prevent the leaches of the sail from flapping, and to relieve the small yards, a light stay is led from each end of them to the extremity of the mainyard, and made fast to the second pair of eyes already mentioned. As to size, I have used in a gale a sail six feet by three feet, but this is equal to close-reefed storm canvas. My next one was nine feet by six feet, but this is a little too large for one man if the wind is strong. I should recommend about seven feet six inches by five feet as a good size for one skater to handle. I have found, however, that two people can manage a sail together with great comfort. Then the nine feet by six feet sail is none too large, and I have no doubt that tall men could easily manage a much larger one. Two rows of reef points would be a great addition, and might very easily be arranged. The sail must stand perfectly flat, and the yards and gear must be stout enough to bear the strain of setting everything up taut. In sailing alone, the skater should keep the greater part of his sail behind him, otherwise he will infallibly be taken aback if the wind is before the beam. Running before the wind needs no comment, but to work to windward satisfactorily, and tack smoothly, requires some practice.

"When two go together, the sail is under perfect control. The front skater steers, and the hinder one, who is in command, trims the canvas correctly by the wind. It is equally easy to gybe or tack, and one can always stop immediately by coming head to wind.

"I have found this a most exciting sport, and it might be utilized for racing to any extent; but its great advantage is that it is at its best on the days when every other kind of skating is more plague than pleasure—when the wind brings you up 'all standing' in the middle of your favourite figure, and the cold is so searching that you wish yourself at home. Then, with an ulster buttoned up to his nose, and an extra warm pair of gloves, the skating sailor can get under way in comfort, flying to and fro like an express train, and the harder it blows the better he will like it."

"That's good enough, Jerry? We'll make a couple. The poles are easily got; but how about the canvas? That's expensive."

"Won't Mrs. Quadling lend you some? Perhaps she has an old sheet she won't mind cutting up."

In the morning they showed her the picture, and asked her very politely to help them. Being in a better humour than usual, she was disposed to help them, so with a minimum of grumbling, she made a search for suitable pieces of canvas, and at length discovered a roll of canvas, such as is used for covering boxes and packing-cases, and which had remained over after some previous packing operation. She told them they could have this, and by half-past ten o'clock they had completed their sails, and rigged them up; carrying them down to the ice stretcher-fashion.

The doctor and the curate, and Knox and several other neighbours, were on the ice, starting a prearranged game of hockey, and when they saw the boys come down with such outlandish objects, they came crowding round to see whatever they could be.

"What on earth have you got there, Penniless?"

"Sails," replied Peter, buckling on his skates.

"Sails! ha, ha, ha! Where's your boat and your water?"

"Here's the boat," said Peter, rising, and lifting up his sail, shooting out on to the ice as he did so.

Now there was a good breeze blowing, which made skating against it not so easy as skating with it, and Peter did not anticipate the strength of it on his sail. A puff came down between the trees and caught his uplifted canvas as he slid out, and in a moment, before he knew what was going to happen, it whisked him along with great speed, bang through the group of men in front of him. Down went the doctor to right of him, down went Knox to the left of him, and a small boy who was standing, open-mouthed, staring at the proceedings, went down in front of him. Peter lifted up his legs and jumped clear of the boy, and then went shooting along the ice utterly unable to stop himself or to guide himself. He stuck to his sail like a Trojan; and at last, by leaning hard on one side, he contrived to run sideways to the wind, and finally to lie close hauled, still proceeding at a very great pace. Then he thought he would make a tack, and accordingly luffed up into the wind, and took the wind on the other side of the sail, so that he was to leeward of it. Then his triumphant course was interrupted. A little careless steering lost him his balance, and down he went on his back, while the sail went off across the lake on its own account.

The sail was soon recovered, and there was no damage done to Peter. Gerard and the curate got under way jointly, and managed exceedingly well. Peter stuck to his big sail all alone, and soon got sufficiently skilled in its management to have rare fun. Knox started off home to get one made for himself, and so did the doctor, both returning with rough-and-ready contrivances in an hour and a half's time. Hockey was abandoned in favour of the new amusement, and the four sails and their human masts shot here and there over the lake with increasing speed as the wind increased. They would all tack up to the windward end of the lake, and then start together to run down with the wind, racing against each other. At times they would fairly seem to fly, their skates so lightly touching as to make but the slightest mark on the hard ice. The snow patches, and

the roughnesses caused by the holes dug in pursuit of the pike, were jumped over with ease, although a fall now and then repaid their too great boldness.

As a corollary to skating, and where there is plenty of space, sailing on skates is a most exhilarating pastime, and one which I heartily recommend to my youthful readers; and should the writer of the letter above quoted ever read this chapter, please will he accept my thanks for starting the idea in my mind?

In this new amusement the day passed quickly, and the evening shades began to fall. The wind, which was from the west, had grown stronger and much warmer, and, notwithstanding the approach of night, there was a slight but unmistakeable thaw, which made the surface of the ice slightly damp.

"There is a change coming," observed the doctor. "We shall get no more skating, so we must make the most of the ice now. What a pity there is no moon! Let us have one more race."

And still it was "one more race," until the gloaming was full upon them; and then they agreed upon one for the very last.

Now Gerard and the curate had discovered that by holding their sail up high they got a better wind, and could go faster. True they could not then see where they were going, but they thought they knew the marks on the ice so well that this was of no consequence. But the pace on this last race was so great that the end of the lake was reached before they were aware of it, and in the growing dark they did not see the marks which their turning skates had before made. They were first, and gave a cheer at the result, which prevented them hearing the warning cry which Peter gave. The next instant they shot head first into the brushwood, which there came down to the margin. Crash! went the sails and branches, and the curate and Gerard were lying a good ten feet into the bushes, amid a tangle of canvas and briars, and broken twigs. They crawled out amid a roar of laughter from the others, and gathered themselves together rather ruefully to survey damages. When they had shaken and

brushed themselves there was not much the matter. A few scratches and tears of clothes were the sum total ; but the curate's nose was dreadfully scratched, and when he looked at himself in Mrs. Quadling's mirror, he did not feel very happy.

"It is all very well for you to laugh, doctor, but you haven't got to officiate in church to-morrow as I have."

"If you will come to me in the morning, I will paint your nose so carefully with bismuth powder that it will not be noticed ; but you must be careful not to wipe it off with your pocket-handkerchief."

Next morning both Peter and Gerard managed to get to church, and were glad to see that the curate's damaged nose was very presentable. Once, however, he took out his pocket-handkerchief, and put it up to his nose with the evident intention of giving a good and, indeed, necessary blow. A sudden thought seemed, however, to strike him, and, with a palpable sigh, he hastily withdrew his hand, and returned the handkerchief to his pocket. Peter glanced at Gerard, who also had perceived and understood the ludicrous gesture, and it needed all their care to keep their countenances decently grave, and their risible faculties under control.

As it occurs to me that my readers may like further technical instructions as to the mode of tacking and handling skate sails, I hunted through my bound *Fields* for another letter from the same pen as the former one, and I now give his instructions in his own words, rather than spoil them by paraphrasing them. They are as follows :—

"First, as to tacking. This may be accomplished in two different ways, both of which I will endeavour to describe briefly : (a) When close hauled—say, on the starboard tack—the sail being on the leeside of the man, the right or weather foot will be in front, the other in a line behind it, the left hand will be forward, and the right (which answers to main sheet) holding the yard behind his back. When it becomes necessary to go

about, by a sharp inclination of his skates the skater luffs sharply to windward, the sail shakes, the feet are changed, the hands remaining in the same position as before ; the sail rapidly fills on the other side, and the skater shoots away smoothly on the port tack, with his sail to windward of him. In moderate weather, the more smartly this is done the better. When blowing hard, it is necessary to take a wide sweep and shoot farther to windward in stays, running a little off the wind for a moment after filling away on the fresh tack. When tacking in this manner the yard will be alternately to windward and to leeward of the sail. In the former of these positions, the strain on it becomes very great (I carried away my mainyard three times this winter) ; and for this, as well as other reasons, it may be desirable to tack in the other way, as follows :—

“(b) When close hauled, with the sail to windward of the man, and desiring to go about without bringing the wind on the other side of the sail, the skater, instead of luffing, turns his skates to leeward, keeping the sail spread behind his back, and running for a moment right before the wind. While in this position he rapidly shifts his hands along the yard until he reaches the point at which the balance of his head and after canvas becomes correct (this is a most important consideration). What was the after hand on the other tack becomes the fore hand now, and what was the leach now becomes the luff of the sail. With a slight turning of his skates to windward, and trimming his canvas accordingly, the skater hauls his wind in a moment, and shoots away on the fresh tack with unhindered velocity, and, if the manœuvre has been skilfully performed, with a loss of only a yard or two to leeward. I believe that there is nothing in the management of ships or boats of any size that is analogous to this method of tacking, and that it is exclusively the property of the skating sailor. I recommend the latter plan for sailing single-handed, and the former when two people are going together.

"Secondly, as to passing other people. I found I could see very well if anyone was in the way; and by going astern of anyone crossing my bow, it was easy to avoid collisions. In the case of other people sailing, the rule of the road at sea should be adopted.

"Thirdly,—Changing feet is perfectly easy; one foot can be slid in front of the other at any time. This will soon be discovered, as the pressure on the feet produces uneasy sensations for the first half hour.

"Fourthly.—Any skates that are sure not to come off (as Acmes often do) will answer equally well.

"When close hauled, the skater keeps by far the greater portion of the sail behind him; when reaching, he pushes it more forward—this answers to setting a big jib; and when running he stands right in the middle.



CHAPTER XXX.

A rapid thaw—A gale in the woods.

THE thaw, once started, was extremely rapid. The wind had settled in the south, and blew warm to the feel. In two days' time the trees were free of snow, and, except on the shady sides of hedges and in places where the snow had drifted, the natural hues of the earth were once more visible. The grass looked pale and soddened, and the hedges and woods brown and sear; but it was a relief to see them again, after all the glaring white which had for so long plagued the eye. The ice was, of course, a much longer time in disappearing, as its great thickness took a considerable time to melt; but in the neighbourhood of the decoy pipes its disappearance was accelerated by the keepers, and the bays were soon open water. The ducks began to come back again, and by the beginning of February the decoy had resumed its wonted appearance, although other portions of the lake were still covered with rotten ice two or three inches thick.

Gerard had gone back to his school, but came tearing back to Wetacre on the Saturday morning in an excited state. Peter saw him coming down the long slope with his feet up, and the strong southerly wind urging his bicycle along at a fine pace.

"Hallo, Jerry! I did not expect to see you back again so soon. What's up?"

"Something awfully important, Peter," replied Gerard, dismounting. "What should you say if I were to leave you and



A RAPID THAW.

go to a distance?"

"That depends on the occasion. You have not had a row with old Blackwood, have you, Jerry?"

"Oh, dear, no! quite the other way about. A friend of his in Northumberland wants a private tutor for his son, and Mr. Blackwood thinks I would do. He says he should be sorry to lose me, but that it is a chance I ought not to miss. If I go, I must go at once. What do you say?"

"Why, old man, I say the same as Blackwood. I shall be very sorry indeed to lose you, but it is a good chance, and you must take it. We

must write long letters to each other very often, and make the best of the absence."

"I suppose it is wisest to go. The screw is awfully good for a fellow of my age, and it may lead to something better."

"Come in and tell Quadling. We have just come in from the decoy, after a good take. He will be glad to hear of your success. If you are to go next week, can you not stay here until to-morrow night?"

"Certainly, old man! What a terrific wind is blowing."

"Yes; and the fishermen say that a big gale is coming from the south-westward. Hark how the wind moans!"

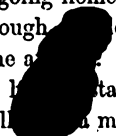
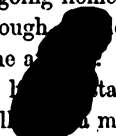
"Yes; and the moans sound worse between the gusts when the wind falls a little."

As the day wore on the wind increased, until at nightfall it was blowing such a gale as had not been known for forty years. The sea was not very heavy, as the wind was partly off the land, and there were no wrecks close in shore; but out at sea, on one of the banks that fringe the east coast a mile or two out, a "flare" was distinguishable as the darkness came on. It was a signal of distress from some vessel on the sand, but no help could be rendered, and after watching it for some time it disappeared and was not again seen. The vessel, whatever it was, was broken up by the morning, and its crew was never heard of. It affected the boys much to think that the fitful light was tended by men in the last agonies of death, and that when its flame went out, so did their lives.

Nor was the land free from danger during the hurricane that was raging. The trees swayed madly to and fro, although their leafless branches offered the least possible resistance to the wind. The groaning of the bending trunks, the creaking of boughs, and the mad tossing of smaller branches were strange to hear and see, and the woodlands were convulsed and torn as if by the mighty throes of an earthquake. Fragments of twigs and branches flew past like hail, stinging wherever they struck you, and boughs and branches were twisted and torn off and hurled to the ground. Every now and then a mighty crash was heard,

as some tree, higher and older than its neighbours, snapped its trunk or was uprooted and fell to the ground, doing great damage to other trees in its fall. A large poplar on the edge of the keeper's garden fell right across it, and within twenty feet of the gable of the cottage, against which some of the branches were broken. It knocked down the railings of the kennels, and the dogs became so frantic with terror at the unearthly sound of the tempest, that Quadling thought it well to let them loose, and allow them to troop into the kitchen, where they sat around the fire shaking with nervousness, and occasionally giving vent to mournful howls.

Fortunately there were no other trees which by their fall could injure the cottage or the adjacent premises, so that no fear was entertained on that score; but there was one great difficulty which had to be overcome. Mrs. Spencer had sent her companion, a nice-looking young lady of three or four and twenty, to Mrs. Quadling with some message, and she was afraid to return to the Hall. She had come just before tea, and had stayed to that simple meal, expecting that the coachman, returning from a drive to Crostwich station, would call for her and drive her to the Hall. But the coachman had, as they afterwards found, been stopped by a tree which had fallen across the road. Trying to return, he found his retreat barred by another tree which had fallen since he had passed it. Unable either to go or return, he had left the carriage on the road drawn up close by the hedge, taken the horses out, got on the back of one and led the other, and made the best of his way home in fear and trembling, and with many détours through fields to avoid fallen trees or spots where trees threatened to fall.

Miss Bellamy might well be afraid of going home. She could not get to the Hall except by going through a long glade of the wood and across the park, or by the  Either way was dangerous, and Mr. Quadling urged her to stay all night; and Peter offered to run up to the Hall  a message, or to

escort her there himself if she desired to go. She did desire to return very much, and Peter, being afraid of the avenue, where the trees were ancient, with many rotten branches, which must now be tumbling about in all directions, decided to take the way through the wood. He would not allow Gerard to accompany him, because he had a nervous fear lest something might happen to prevent Gerard taking advantage of the opportunity now offered him; a small branch striking him on the head or face might easily do it, and Peter did not wish to run risks. He had what is commonly called a presentiment of danger—not to himself or Miss Bellamy, but he had for Gerard, and so Gerard had to give way.

With Miss Bellamy clinging to his arm, Peter faced the blasts. It was a curious contrast, the dainty, well-dressed girl and the stalwart keeper in his rough working dress; but Peter, at all events, did not think of this, his only concern being to support his charge in the gusts which seemed to assail them on all sides at once and to shake them angrily in their grasp. The commotion of the wood and the howling of the gale among the leaning and straining branches were sufficiently alarming to a man, but terrifying indeed to a woman, and Miss Bellamy was fain to admit that she was sorry she had ventured.

"Never mind, we are half through the wood now, and once in the path we shall be all right. Oh, take care!" And clasping her in his arms, Peter bounded madly away, just in time to escape the branches of a large tree, which, with a thunderous crash, came down across the glade. Some of the outer twigs caught him across the shoulders, raising big weals even through the thick velveteen; but he kept his feet, and ran on a few yards to a more open part of the glade. When he put Miss Bellamy down, she could not stand, but would have subsided to the ground, had not Peter retained his hold of her. She was in a dead faint, and Peter felt in a thorough fix. There was no water near, and the burnt feathers, which were the only reme-

dies Peter knew of. One thing was clear, however, they could not stay there, for there was a brisk cannonade of twigs and small branches going on, with the prospect of something heavier. So hastily loosening the fastenings about her neck (in doing which he got an ugly scratch on his finger from a brooch), he took her in his arms like a baby, and went off at the best pace he could. She was no light weight, and an unconscious woman, who cannot accommodate her figure to her carriage, is much heavier than a live woman, as I can testify. But Peter, though his arms and back were sorely tried, dared not stop until he was out of the wood, and then, reaching a runnel of water, he halted, and in a short time succeeded in bringing the damsel to her senses.

When, some time after, he led her tottering figure into the great hall, and Mrs. Spencer herself came out in alarm, he yielded up his charge with intense relief. Mrs. Spencer quite understood the danger of passing through the wood at this time, and urged Peter to stay at the Hall; but he was anxious to get back to Gerard, and refused her kind offer.

When he came to the wood he concluded the best way would be to take it at a run, and he accordingly ran like a deer along the track, often stumbling, but never falling, leaping any dark and indistinct objects which might be a fallen branch, and feeling more in a funk, and having more the sensation of running away from something or somebody, than he had ever had before in his young life. He arrived at the cottage breathless, and related his adventures to a sympathising audience.

By morning the gale had abated, but evidence of its ravages lay all around. It was pitiful to see the wreck of the trees. In places they were levelled in groups and lanes, as if a whirlwind had passed in a limited line. On the level of the marshes, which formed one part of the property, there was scarcely a tree left standing. The roots, which in that damp, soft soil crept along the drier surface rather than dive down into it, had no firm

hold, and as the trees lay prone the roots were lifted high in the air, with great patches of soil adhering to them.

The privacy of the decoy had suffered considerably. There were great gaps in the trees, which permitted a view of the ducks from a distant road, and during the ensuing summer screens of reeds had to be built up in many places to take the place of the prostrate trees. Every vestige of ice and snow had, of course, disappeared, and the mildness of spring had suddenly taken the place of the keen frost.

This was Gerard's last experience of Wetacre for a considerable time, for by the end of the next week he had gone to the north to undertake his new and congenial duties, leaving Peter to practice gamekeeping, give himself a commercial education, and theorise about farming.



CHAPTER XXXI.

A cruel poaching dodge—Hooking ducks—Mallard and peregrine—The peregrine's nest—The ruined church—Shooting the falcons.

THE month of February passed with but little incident. The decoy was daily visited by one or other of the keepers, and worked whenever there were a sufficient quantity of ducks collected there. Peter had picked up the art so quickly, that Quadling allowed him to work a pipe whenever he saw fit, whether Quadling himself was there or not. One day, while Peter was leisurely walking towards the traverses, his quick eye caught sight of some commotion among the rushes on the margin of the lake. At first he thought it was a fox which had pounced on a duck; but on scanning the spot with his glass (which he always kept slung by his side), he perceived that there was no fox there, but that a duck had apparently been caught in a snare.

Lighting his bit of turf, he crept down to see what had happened. And then a cruel poaching dodge was revealed to him. A rough stake had been thrust into the mud, and from this stake were dependant several short lines armed with fish-hooks, and baited with worms. Pieces of cork acted as floats to suspend the baits within reach of a duck's bill. The success of this wretched expedient was manifested by an unfortunate mallard, which, having swallowed one of the worms, was hooked in the throat, and was vainly struggling to get free. Peter had to crawl on his stomach down to the water's edge, to keep out of sight of the fowl that were on the water, and he quickly put



A CRUEL CAPTURE.

the poor bird out of its agony, and pulled up the stake. He was extremely indignant at the trick, and was persuaded in his own mind that it was Susie Saunders who had done it, probably at the instigation of her grandmother. He did not want to take Susie prisoner again, or he would have left the stake and watched for her; but when night came he carried it to Mrs. Saunders' garden, and, without disturbing anyone, he planted it in the earth close by her back door. Peter meant this as a gentle hint that she had better not do such a trick again, and he was not aware that the old woman kept tame ducks. It so happened, however, that she had that day bought a drake and three ducks from a dealer, and in the early morning she was awakened by their cries. Going down, she found the drake and a duck fast hooked on her own diabolical contrivance. They had to be killed, and as they were not fat enough for sale, the old hag was punished for her wickedness.

A day or two after Peter met Susie gathering sticks, and upbraided her with this new attempt at poaching. She assured him that this time it was her grandmother who had set the lines.

"Indeed, Mr. Penniless, you have been so good to me, that I don't wish to plague you with any more poaching; but granny hates you for killing her cats, and if it were in her power to do you a mischief, I am sure she would. But if ever she thinks of such a thing, I'll be sure to warn you, even if I suffer for it afterwards."

"Really, Susie, I am very much obliged to you," said Peter, sarcastically.

"You may laugh now, Mr Penniless; but you may be glad of my help some day, for all that."

"Good morning!" said Peter, abruptly, and turned on his heel.

He could not help seeing in Susie's eyes the admiration of himself, which the bold, handsome girl took no pains to con-

ceal, and, being a modest and high-minded young fellow, Peter had no mind to dally in her company.

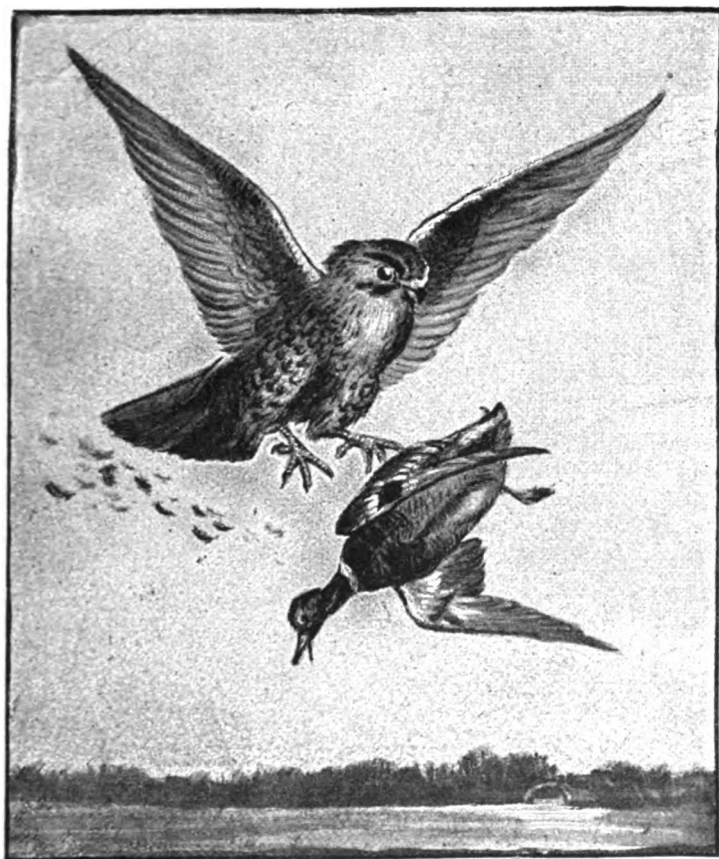
As Susie looked after his tall and stalwart form, she said to herself: "If I had a man like that to see after me, I should be as good as gold. But that will never be. I'd give my life for that young fellow's."

Susie spoke perhaps with a sentimental exaggeration, little thinking that she might afterwards give her life for Peter's.

Peter went gaily on his round, scenting a breath of spring in the air, and feeling joyous accordingly.

While walking through a marshy hollow he flushed a mallard, which, instead of flying straight away, began to circle, and so rise in the air. Looking up in astonishment at this unusual proceeding, Peter saw the cause of it. A large hawk, which he at once knew to be a peregrine falcon, although he had never seen one on the wing, swept from behind the wood and began rapidly circling upwards, trying to get above the duck, in order to strike at it. Higher and higher the two birds rose, the duck circling around in a very ungainly fashion compared with the magnificent and powerful sweeps of the falcon. At last the duck seemed to know that its hour had come, for its enemy was now high above it. Closing its wings it came down swiftly, like a lump of lead, inclining towards the river. But the peregrine was swifter in its descent, and struck the duck with such force that a cloud of feathers flew from it. The duck fell dead on the water, and the falcon, after a sweep round as if to recover breath, picked it up and flew off with it.

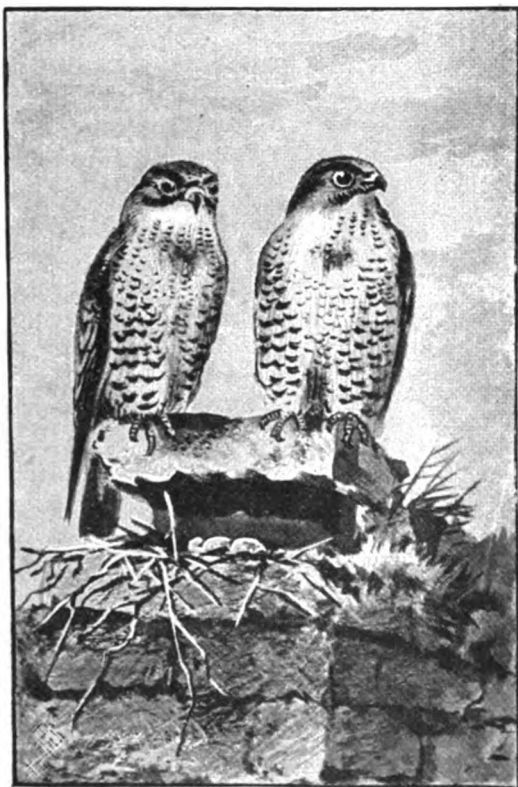
Peter was an interested spectator of this aerial encounter. The birds were out of shot, or the peregrine would not have escaped. Beautiful as he was, and much as Peter admired him, he was too dangerous a customer to leave at large. From its appearance at this season of the year, it was probable that it would nest in the vicinity; and this belief was strengthened by the fact that a pair of birds were seen the next day. A watch was set upon



PEREGRINE AND DUCK.

their movements, from which it was discovered that the falcons were nesting in the "old church."

At one spot, about two miles from Wetacre, where the low coast rose so as to form a respectable cliff, was a ruined church perched on the summit, and a landmark for miles. A tall tower and a long single wall, with several arched windows, was all that remained. On the top of the tower the peregrines had built their nest. There was no attempt at concealment, the sticks of the nest were plainly visible, wedged in a rift in the wall. The hawks, no doubt, trusted to the lonely position of the tower and its inaccessibility for protection



PEREGRINES.

Peter acquainted the doctor naturalist of the fact, and they walked to the ruin and surveyed it with a view of seeing how the nest was to be approached. The old birds might have been shot from a place of concealment hard by, but the doctor was keen to get the eggs first.

After some deliberation they borrowed a boy's kite, which they flew over the tower, and used the string of it to haul a light cord over the top. The cord in its turn drew up a stout tree-felling rope. One end of this was made fast, and, after seeing that it could not slip off the tower, Peter ascended with tolerable ease, the flint work of the ruin offering good foothold, while he had the support of the rope for his hands.

Reaching the nest, he peeped into it, while both falcons flew high overhead.

"Well, is there anything in?" shouted the impatient doctor.

"One egg. Shall I take it?"

"No, leave it until they have finished laying, then we shall get four."

Peter came down again, and then, in order that no other person should rob the nest, they drew the rope down again.

A week after they again flew their kite over the tower, and hauled up the rope. This time there were four eggs in the nest, and Peter put them into a little basket which he had brought with him, and lowered them carefully down to the doctor, who received them with exuberant delight.

Peter had now to destroy the old birds, and spying a likely place of concealment at the further end of the long wall, he swung himself on to it, and crawled along on hands and knees until he reached the remains of a spiral staircase. Hauling his gun up with the line, he hid himself in this staircase, with a broken window orifice for a loophole. One of the falcons was visible at an immense height in the air; the other was nowhere to be seen. The doctor, after blowing his treasures on the spot, departed, leaving Peter lying *perdu*. For at least an hour he

remained there, without seeing anything of the peregrines. There was a nasty cold sleet blowing in from over the sea, and, although he was in the shelter of the staircase, it was exceedingly draughty and cold. The dull, angry-looking sea was at times blotted out by showers of sleet, and then again there would be a pale blue rift in the clouds, and a cold, dim sunshine would faintly illumine the scene, making the "white horses" a little whiter, and showing here and there a passing sail.

Another hour passed, and then a falcon swept close over the nest with an angry cry. Then the other bird came, and one of them perched on the stonework, while the other, possibly the female, hovered close over the despoiled nest, uttering a most peculiar lamenting cry. Peter's heart smote him, even as, in rapid succession, he pulled the triggers, and both of the noble birds fell fluttering to the ground.



CHAPTER XXXII.

The First of March—Shooting the decoy—The French sportsman again—His great achievement—Sitting on a duck's nest.

FEBRUARY was a cold, coarse month, but March came in like a lamb. The first of the month was so sunny and warm that people left off overcoats, and were inclined to sit about on gates and fences, and bask in the genial warmth.

With the last day of February the decoy season ended, and in accordance with long-established custom, the first of March was set apart for the invasion of the decoy with the gun. In the absence of male members of the family at the Hall, the keepers were the hosts on this occasion, and invited those to whom they desired to pay a compliment. So the party mustered at the cottage, and consisted of the land agent of the estate, Mr. Knox, and two or three other farmers, the doctor, and a couple of tradesmen from Crostwich, who were friends of Quadling's.

At the last moment, who should appear but Monsieur Malahide, got up in the most expensive manner, and armed with his gun. Quadling touched his hat to him, but looked very glum. The gentleman explained that he had met Mrs. Spencer in London, and that she had told him of the sport that was to take place, whereupon he had begged for permission to run down for the day and join in it, to which she had graciously assented.

Quadling replied civilly, and told Peter to do his best to show

the Frenchman sport, and he added, in a whisper, "keep him from doing mischief to himself and others."

The instructions given to the party were to approach the decoy from all sides, one or two to each pipe, and then when Quadling fired, all were at liberty to do what they could. Pieces of burning turf were doled out, and the party divided. Peter led M. Malahide into the traverse of the pipe allotted to him, and then begged permission to explain the absolute necessity of quiet, and of keeping hidden.

"Quite so, my young friend. I understand; and I shall not offend if this vile smoke does not make cough. It is dreadful."

Creeping behind the screens, Peter opened a peephole and motioned his companion to look. In front of the pipe were several fowl—not many, but very near—and Monsieur was so excited, that he fell on his knees, and tried to poke the barrel of his gun through the peephole, until Peter restrained him.

"Wait until you hear a shot, sir, and then you can blaze away as hard as you like."

Presently, bang came a shot from the other side. Peter rose to his feet, and as the ducks rose in affright he brought two of them down. Monsieur let both barrels off a little too late, but one duck fell winged, to his great delight. Peter thought that the finishing-off of the duck would afford the Frenchman an hour's amusement at the least, and he considered himself free to seek a more favourable position.

The ducks flew about in bewilderment for some time, coming back again time after time over the trees, and a good many of their number succumbed to the fusillade before the flock thought fit to go off to sea. Then the party gathered together to beat the rushes around the lake in search of cripples and hiding fowl.

"Where have you left the Frenchman, Peter?" enquired Quadling.

"Oh! I left him trying to kill a duck he had winged; listen to him peppering away. He will be quite happy."

"I think you ought to go and see after him, Peter."

"Don't condemn Peter to such a task," said Knox. "Let us enjoy our own sport, and leave M. Malahide to his. There he goes with both barrels at something or other."

Carefully beating around the lake, and bagging a duck here and there, they left the Frenchman far behind, and thought no more about him.

It may seem very unsportsmanlike to shoot ducks so late in the season, when they are pairing, and almost nesting. The only answer I can give to this is that on this decoy it is the custom, and is supposed for some reason or another to be necessary.

Coming to a marshy hollow leading up into the wood, where woodcock were known to resort, they proceeded up it. Not a gun had been fired in it since the arrival of the woodcock, and those that were still there were not much alarmed at the intrusion, but floated lazily along with an owl-like flight, which was, however, changed to one rapid and erratic enough when the shot went scattering through the underwood, and two or three woodcock had come to an untimely end.

"I say, Mr. Quadling, you have had somebody here setting springes," said Knox, stooping down and picking one up.

Further search revealed two or three others, which, however, had been set some time.

"You have got some clever poachers hereabout," remarked the agent.

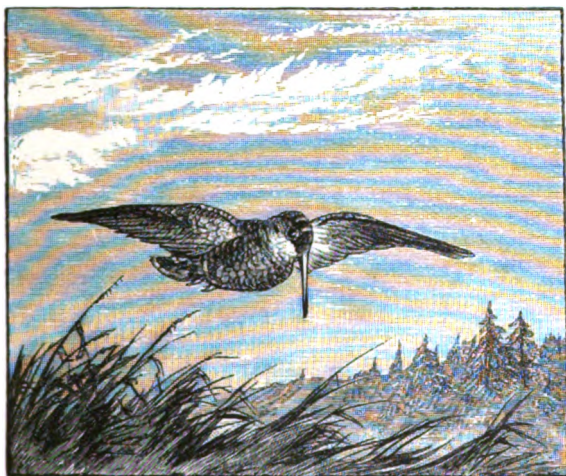
"Well, that beats me. I haven't seen a springe properly set like that since I was a boy," said Quadling.

Peter said nothing, but privately put the springe-setting down to Susie or her grandmother.

It took them two hours to beat round the lake, and as they returned to the pipes, Peter felt his conscience reproach him for having left the stranger to his own devices so long. As they drew near, they saw him sitting on a little mound of fern on the top of a traverse bank, smoking a cigar

“Why, look,” exclaimed Peter, “he is sitting on a duck’s nest! There were two eggs in it this morning.”

In explanation of Peter’s remark, it should be said that the decoy ducks, which were half wild, nested in the neighbourhood of the decoy, and always covered their eggs over with dead leaves when they left their nests. Monsieur, seeing a spot slightly elevated above the ground, and covered with soft, dry



WOODCOCK.

leaves, had chosen it as a seat, and as he rose with a patronising gesture of welcome, and exposed beneath his short, close-fitting jacket a rounded expanse smeared with yellow yolk and dotted with egg-shells, he was greeted with a shout of laughter which surprised him greatly. When the nature of the disaster was pointed out to him, he joined good-humouredly in the laugh, and submitted to be scraped and rubbed down.

“Ah! never mind, my friend! It is only one pair of trousers spoiled; but that is made up for by the magnificent sport I have

obtained. I apologise for not following the party, but the ducks remained, and so did I; and I shot them one by one. Five, six, seven of them, I have killed, and they do float on the water for your dogs to extricate them. *Voilà!*" and pointing to the bay, the others saw that it was dotted with dead ducks. A retriever, catching the gesture, at once dashed in and swam to the nearest. It did not seize it, however, but, after sniffing at it, swam to another, and then to all in succession, but without touching one.

"What on earth is the matter with the dog?" said the agent, while a horrid suspicion arose in Peter's mind. But upon Quadling the effect was electrical. He flung down his gun, and then his hat, and danced about in speechless rage, while Peter prudently retreated in search of a boat. When the exasperated keeper found his voice, he exclaimed,

"They are my tame ducks—the decoy ducks! They are pinioned so that they could not get away; and he has shot the lot. Oh, Lord! oh, Lord! Get out of my sight, man, or I'll do you a mischief."

"I think you had better go, Monsieur," said the agent; "this is a most unfortunate occurrence."

"I will go at once. I am greatly distressed; but I did not know." And Monsieur Malahide made the best of his way to the Hall, and thence to catch the night train from Crostwich, fully resolved not to seek sport at Wetacre again. When he got to London, he posted a five-pound note to the keeper, with a letter full of apologies, and so did his best to repair the mischief he had done.

Everybody was greatly amused at the incident, except Quadling, who was sore about it for a long time, and cross with Peter for leaving the Frenchman. One day, however, the ridiculous side of the matter occurred to him, and he burst out laughing. This restored his good humour, and Peter was forgiven.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Netting a trout stream for pike—Heavy feeding in an old-fashioned way.

THE trout stream that ran through the western portion of the estate flowed for about a mile and a half through flat, boggy land, and to facilitate the drainage its channel had been deepened and its banks straightened, so that it had somewhat the appearance of a canal, except that its current was somewhat faster. In this portion of the river there were many fine trout, but few small ones, the reason being that there were a great many pike there as well. It was necessary for the welfare of the rest of the stream that the pike should occasionally be attacked in their stronghold, and this was generally done twice a year, in the autumn and in the early spring, just before the spawning season. This year, owing to the cold weather, the spawning was late, and at the beginning of March the pike had not yet got into the ditches for spawning. Part of this boggy stretch belonged to Mrs. Spencer, and part to a Mr. Spendelow, a yeoman, who owned a goodly estate, and, in addition, hired a large extent of shooting. Spendelow was a great character in his way. Except on Sundays, he was dressed in the very roughest and plainest of clothes, and you would only take him for the very smallest of tenant farmers. His wife and daughters had a carriage and pair to drive out in, and nice dresses to wear; but when at home, they put off their finery and worked about the house and farm, the kitchen and dairy, as farmers' wives and daughters of the old school used to do. In Caldecott's

"House that Jack Built" his picture of the owner of the house is the exact representation of old Spendelow. Possibly, if Mr. Caldecott and I were to compare notes, we should find that we had the same original in our minds.

The netting was a joint affair, the nets being found by Mr. Quadling, and the refreshment by Mr. Spendelow. Quadling told Peter that the day was always looked upon as a frolic, and cautioned him against the strength of old Spendelow's beer. A bleak March wind was blowing as the party assembled at the upper end of the straight reach. It consisted of Spendelow and some farmer friends, the keepers and Mr. Knox, and several watchers and assistants. There were two drag nets, each about twenty yards long, with a poke in the middle. The *modus operandi* was simply for the party to divide, taking each bank, and to drag the nets down stream, one after the other, the second net about a hundred yards behind the first. There were, therefore, four groups of men, two on each bank of the river, with the nets stretched across between them.

It was curious to see how the fish always strove to force their way up stream. They never, or hardly ever, fled before the net down stream, but made repeated dashes at the net close to the banks, where there was often a hiatus, or leaped over the top of it, or took advantage of any irregularity in the bottom to creep under. A shoal of dace were first struck, and about half of them got into the poke. Then the men on one bank let out line, while those on the opposite one hauled in the net and took out the fish. Then the net was hauled across again, and the drag proceeded. The rest of the shoal got into the second net, and the take of this net was larger altogether than that of the first net, probably owing to the water having become muddied by the passage of the first.

Then there came three or four perch, and then a brace of jack, the latter occasioning great excitement and shouting of advice as they struggled in the net. So they went on down the stream

with a steady progress, now and then stopping to disentangle a pike or other fish. There were but few fences to get over, but very many dykes, and the latter had to be jumped. Now, the width of them was by no means contemptible, and to the older and stouter men of the party the jumping was a formidable matter. Now and then one would make two or three false starts at a ditch he felt to be too big for him, then, hardening his heart, he would rush at it, alight on the further bank, balance for a moment clawing at the air, and then go souse backwards into the cold water, amid the laughter of his more fortunate companions. Then a halt would be called to enable him to take a little whisky as a safeguard against the cold, in which the others would keep him company. So that by the time there had been six duckings, divided among four stout farmers, flasks were getting empty, and tongues were wagging fast. The hampers of fish were becoming heavy, and the hangers-on were sent off with them to the homestead. In one spot, where the water was a little deeper than usual, six fine pike bolted into the net at once. Three were secured, and two pushed past, only to get caught in the second net; the sixth escaped altogether. They were all about the same weight—six pounds or so.

A little later on, when the jack went up the dykes and ditches to spawn, the farm boys were allowed to snare them. A stout rod, with about three feet of soft, thin copper wire, double, and very slightly twisted, ending in a sliding loop, formed the weapon. Whenever a jack was espied lying motionless in the shallow water, the noose was inserted in the water, and slowly moved over the pike's head, until it got well beyond the gills, and then a sudden jerk tightened it, and the fish was hauled bodily on to the grass. This is a deadly way of slaughtering pike. A clever river watcher could often dispose of a score in an afternoon, from the baby fish of a pound weight, to the six or seven-pounder, which was as large as any pike were allowed to grow in that stream.

In a couple of hours the end of the pike stretch was reached, and there the party were met by a convoy of provisions, liquid only; and after doing more than justice to the ale, the men, except the wet ones—who went home to change—went up to their host's farmhouse, and were ushered into a spacious kitchen, where Peter could not find a spot where he could stand upright, owing to the immense number of hams and sides of bacon hanging from the low ceiling.

Here they sat down to a plentiful meal of cold meats and bread and cheese, and more ale. Peter followed the example of the others in getting outside of his share, but Quadling whispered to him, "Don't spoil your dinner, lad; this is only lunch. We shall have a rare good dinner in a couple of hours' time."

Peter looked aghast, and did not see how he could possibly be ready for another meal in so short a time; but he steadfastly refused Mr. Spendelow's hospitable pressure to have a little more pig's cheek.

The lunch occupied from twelve to one o'clock, and then somebody proposed they should go ratting in the barns. This was agreed to immediately, and a messenger was dispatched to borrow a couple of ferrets from a neighbour. He soon returned with them, and, on entering the large rambling barn, it was apparent that there would be any number of rats there. Peter was told to get on to the top of a lot of straw, and hit about him with a stick at any rats which might come out at the top, while the others took up their positions around the outlets. As soon as the ferrets were put into the holes underneath the straw stack, at least a dozen rats bolted out on the top all around Peter, who jumped to his feet in some alarm and struck right and left at the vicious little creatures; two or three he killed outright, the others slid off the straw and were mobbed by the men and dogs below. From holes here and there, and round about, the rats came singly and in twos and threes, and were attacked by teeth

of dogs and with sticks and besoms by men. The latter is a capital weapon, its bristles will hold a rat down until it can be killed, while it is easier to aim with than a stick. For a time the sport was fast and furious, though not so deadly to the rats as it might have been, had not the yeoman's ale flowed so freely.

When it ceased, the rats had made their way into a group of holes which undermined the floor of a disused corner of the barn. Out of these holes the ferrets returned with heads torn and bleeding, showing that the rats had turned to bay. One huge rat actually ran out after a ferret, and followed it for some yards across the floor, when it was seized by a dog and killed. It was as large as a small rabbit.

"I'll make the varmin come out," said Mr. Spendelow; "bring some water here you, Jack, Tom, and Harry, they shall be drowned out."

The grinning yokels brought can after can of water and poured it into the holes, using enough to make a small pond, and drowning every part of the holes. After standing this for some time, and presumably retreating to the highest part, the rats stampeded and rushed out in a body of a score or more, and as every exit had been barricaded and closed up, but few of them escaped.

It was now time for the men to make themselves in some degree tidy for dinner. Around the table in the big dining-room there gathered some twelve farmers and the two keepers. With the exception of Knox, none of them were of the gentlemanly, well-educated type of the present day, but real, solid, old-fashioned parties, rather rough and very hearty. Peter wondered how his host could have gathered so many of his own sort together; but Spendelow's beef, Spendelow's ale, and Spendelow's port wine were attractions well known in the country side.

Peter groaned in spirit, and regretted his hearty lunch as he surveyed the profusion of fish, joints, fowl, vegetables, pastry,

and puddings on the table. All were on at once, under cover, so as to keep hot, so that only the plates had to be changed. The men only sat down to table. Mrs. Spendelow and her daughters, and some female friends invited to help, waited on the men, and took care to press the good things upon them. These good women had cooked and got ready the repast for their lords' gratification, and now waited upon them most assiduously. Surely this is the true use for woman. If young ladies of the present day thought more of ministering to the wants of the male sex, and less of the vanity of being ministered unto, I am sure they would more readily find husbands. But this is a topic not interesting to my readers, though a subject for cogitation to older heads.

Peter struggled manfully through the dinner, which lasted until half-past four. The acme of politeness seemed to be pressure to eat more. The youngest and prettiest of the Miss Spendelows devoted herself to waiting upon the handsome young keeper, and though Peter responded as well as he could to the plea, "Do have a little more, or I shall think you do not like what I have made," the time came when he felt that he could not eat another spoonful of custard to save his life. When dinner was over, the men strolled into the garden while the table was being cleared. Peter asked Knox what the programme was to be for the evening.

"Tea at half-past five; supper at nine; whiskey, pipes, and cards in the meantime and afterwards."

"Then I shall strike—I shall go home. I shan't want tea or supper for a week."

"All right. I will go also. But we must invent some excuse or Spendelow will be offended. I must visit some of my ewes which are lambing, and I can say you are coming to help me."

So they departed, but Quadling remained, and when he did return he bore an empty basket which he bravely presented to

his wife, saying it contained a brace of the finest pike they had caught that day, and a bunch of flowers from Miss Spendelow, all which articles were the next morning found lying about the road.

Neither you nor I, reader, would like to be in Quadling's shoes the next morning, when Mrs. Quadling talked to him.



CHAPTER XXXIV.

Spring time—Harrying winged poachers—Cute crows—A cat decoy—Thinning the wood-pigeons.

WITH the advance of spring the keepers became busy, and no small proportion of their efforts were directed to destroying winged vermin. Hawks, magpies, jays, and carrion crows were ever ready to prey upon weakly or young birds, or upon eggs, and the keepers returned the attacks to the best of their ability.

The gun was the surest weapon with hawks, which being much bolder are not so crafty as crows, magpies, etc. The hooded or grey crows which are so common in the eastern counties in the winter were tolerably easy to shoot, and as they returned to our more northern breeding-places in the early spring, they had not the opportunity of doing mischief among eggs. The ordinary carrion crows were, however, the most knowing and destructive of villains, and were exceedingly difficult either to shoot or to trap. Quadling always set his face against poison, which he did not like to have about, and only used on rare occasions, or else a few grains of strychnine put in the eyes or bowels of a carcase of any kind is most destructive to winged vermin.

The ordinary steel trap, well hidden, and with an egg-shell stuck on a stick a little beyond the trap, was efficacious for magpies and jays, and occasionally for crows. Where the water

was shallow at the edge of the lake the keepers used to plant an egg on a stick, a foot or two out from the bank, and place a trap between it and the shore. It added to the efficacy of this mode of setting the trap, if a turf causeway were made out to the bait, a couple of inches under water, with the trap placed on the causeway.

Before the grey crows departed, Quadling had winged one, and pegging it to the ground on its back, with outstretched wings, he left it, and hid within shot. Its cries attracted several of its species, who came, not to relieve it of its pain, but to assist in destroying it, and afterwards feast upon it ; so that the keeper got several shots at them.

Peter used to walk through the woods, looking up and craning his neck to search for crows, hawks, and magpies' nests in the trees. The hawks were not very plentiful, and after the eggs were laid, and the birds were sitting, it was an easy matter to watch for and shoot them. So it was with the magpies, and the nests of the latter were always overthrown. It required no slight labour to do this, for the magpies' nest has not only a solid foundation of stick and clay, but a canopy of thorns, sufficient to mend a good-sized gap in a hedge. Peter used to take a pickel, or hay fork, and haul it up after him by a string, and so heave the nest over.

But the crows were a caution. Their nests were easily found ; and well-made nests they are, with their lining of hair and wool. The old birds kept the keenest watch on anyone entering or leaving the wood, and directly a person reached the fence, away the one at the nest would soar. There was one nest close by the pheasant coops, of which Peter was determined to slay the owners. Remembering an old tale, illustrating the statement that crows can't count beyond a certain number, he took several labourers into the wood with him, one of the crows being at the time on the watch on a bare dead tree top a hundred yards away. Then he sent all the men away, and remained himself

in close hiding. It was of no use ; the hen bird would not return, although she had begun to sit. So Peter tried another



A DEADLY DEVICE.

dodge. He rammed a mighty load into an old horse-pistol, and, climbing the tree, he tied it securely to a branch just beneath

the nest, with the muzzle pointing upwards. He then tied a string to the trigger, and passed it through a small pulley secured to the foot of the tree. He left it so for three days, in order that the crows might get used to it, and then he took the ball of string and unrolled it, until it extended to a shed a safe distance from the wood. Then, at midnight he went quietly to the shed and pulled the string. The report was like a small cannon going off, and awakened Quadling, who, however, knew the cause of it, and went to sleep again.

When daylight came, Peter went to the nest and found it blown to pieces, and both crows dead. One of them, the hen, was considerably smashed, while the cock had only been struck by one pellet, from which it would seem that, while the hen was on the nest, the cock was on a branch close by.

The old horse pistol discharged itself and its duty on several similar occasions during the nesting season.

A novel and efficacious, though somewhat cruel, method of attracting the smaller birds, such as jays and magpies, within shot was on one occasion practised by Quadling. He had caught a cat quite uninjured in a box-trap, and Peter met him carrying it as carefully as if it were a pet cat.

"Why, what are you going to do with that mangy brute? It ought to be killed," said Peter.

"So it shall be, but it shall help us to kill something first. Get your gun and come with me; bring a dog-collar and chain."

Peter did so, and accompanied Quadling to a sunny corner at the edge of a coppice, where the hedges met at an angle. Cutting a stout stake, the keeper thrust it into the ground, and taking the collar and chain, fastened the cat to it. Then the two hid themselves and waited. The poor cat began to squall, and in a very short time a jay came and perched on the top of the hedge. Then two magpies came undulating to the spot, and then two more jays, and they began fluttering and chattering, and mob

bing the cat to some purpose. Quadling gave Peter a signal when a convenient grouping of the birds on the top of the



DECOYING JAYS AND MAGPIES.

hedge afforded a good shot, and to the four barrels all the jays and the magpies, and several inquisitive sparrows, fell victims.

In the course of a couple of hours several more shots were obtained in the same manner, but, of course, not quite so successful in point of numbers as the first one. Then the decoy pussy was slaughtered, and the keepers felt that they had done a good afternoon's work.

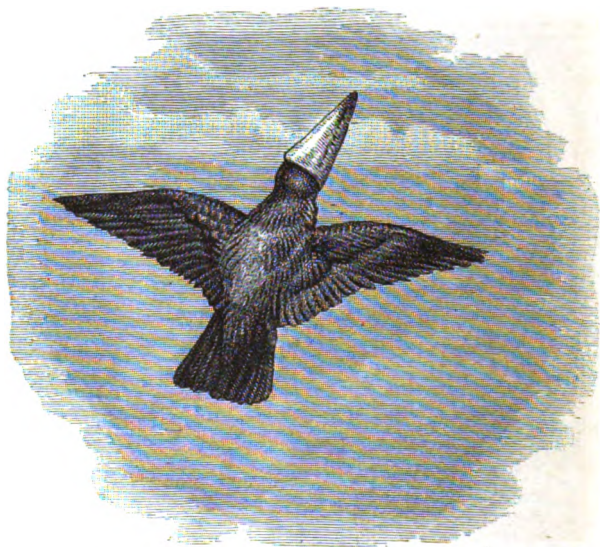
The wood pigeons were a great nuisance. Owing to the quietness of the woods round the decoy, they assembled there in the



SHOOTING WOOD-PIGEONS.

winter time in great numbers, and the noise they made when startled from their perch by the keepers passing beneath was hurtful to the decoy. Besides, they gathered in such flocks that the farmers complained of the damage done to their crops. It, therefore, had become necessary to thin them out as much as possible. One good haul was made on Knox's farm, in the following way: a hiding-place was constructed, and in front of it the ground was baited with corn for a fortnight, so that there came regularly every day a large and increasing flock of wood-pigeons to feed. A punt gun, with its tremendous charge of

powder and shot, was carefully trained to cover the ground ; and one day, when the pigeons had collected in large numbers, Knox crept up and pulled the string tied to the trigger. A hundred and twenty pigeons, dead or wounded, was the result of that shot, but the pigeons were too wary to be caught in the same way a second time.



A CROW'S DEATH-CAP.

Peter had read of the dodge of catching crows and rooks by making small cones of paper, lining them with birdlime and putting a bait in each. These cones were to be laid in the furrows of a ploughed field. The rooks stuck their beaks into them, and they adhered, blindfolding the unfortunate birds which, after flying vainly about, died of fright or exhaustion. Peter mentioned this to Knox, who jumped at the idea, and forthwith set his maids and farm-boys to twist an infinite

number of brown-paper cones, line them with birdlime and put a pea in each. These were dotted about in the fields most infested by the pigeons, and in their usual feeding spots, as marked by their excrement.

The doctor, while driving on his rounds the next morning, was astonished at the behaviour of sundry wood-pigeons which rose suddenly from the fields where they were feeding, and rose spirally in the air to a great height, and then fell headlong to the ground. He saw two fall into the sea, and three or four into the woods, and then he went home and wrote a letter to the *Field* commenting upon the extraordinary occurrence, which seemed to point to some epidemic disease, among the principal symptoms of which was vertigo. This duly appeared in the *Field*, and was followed in the next issue by an anonymous reply from Peter, which made the doctor dreadfully mad for a time, particularly as he received a parcel of a number of pigeons with their death caps on.

This plan was greatly successful in thinning the number of the pigeons, as it was followed by most of the farmers around during the time the pigeons gathered in flocks. When the nesting season came, the wood-pigeons' nests, which are usually left unmolested, were carefully searched out and the trees marked. Then, when the two smooth white eggs had been transformed into plump birds, almost able to fly, the latter were transformed into pies, and for that purpose formed very acceptable presents to many poor villagers. By these means the number of pigeons was kept within reasonable bounds.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Ejecting the rooks—Otter killing lambs—The otter's nest—Otters attacking a keeper.

THERE were several rookeries on the estate, and, by-the-way, one small heronry; and occasionally emigrants from the recognised gatherings would try and found colonies in the decoy woods. These had to be destroyed, and the rooks frightened away. It was easy to shoot the old rooks, but the better way was to destroy the nests if possible. Some were, however, built on such slender branches that Peter would not trust his weight upon them at such a giddy height. He would, therefore, climb as close as he dared, haul his gun up after him, and shoot the nest down with heavy shot. The disturbance of the pheasants was quite a secondary matter compared with the necessity of keeping the decoy woods free from such disturbing things as rooks and pigeons.

Peter's destructive energies were next directed to the circumventing of some otters. A shepherd from one of the farms on the estate came to the cottage one day, and stated that two of his lambs had been killed and carried off by otters, which he was sure had their nest in the "Alder Carr," a very boggy spot surrounding a small pool, which was an offshoot of the lake. Upon being questioned, he asserted that he had followed the track of the otters to the Carr, and that he had there found one of the ewes, who had lost a lamb, standing on the brink of the

bog and calling piteously, looking the while in the direction of a tuft of rushes in the middle of the swamp. Quadling and Peter went with the man to the Carr, and found the marks of otters. The next thing was to get to the nest. Otters usually have their hovers in holes in banks, between rocks, and under tree-roots; but sometimes, particularly in fenny districts, they make large nests in some inaccessible part of a marsh. This was the case now, and as the ground was too soft to support the weight of a man, and the mud was of unknown depth, the shepherd was sent for a couple of broad planks.

One of these was laid on the quagmire, and Peter, walking along it, dragged the other after him, and threw it in advance. By doing this with each board alternately he succeeded in reaching the nest, which he prodded open with a stick. Inside were the remains of a lamb and three baby otters—very pugnacious despite their babyhood. Peter called out to announce his success, and, putting one young one in each side pocket, and carrying the third, he commenced to return. When he had got about twenty yards from the nest, the two old otters emerged from a bush, and came open-mouthed towards him, with the evident intention of attacking him in defence of their young. Quadling was in time to stop one with a well-directed shot, the animal being within a couple of yards of Peter at the time. The other was too close for Quadling to dare to fire, and it made a savage grab at the heavy boot which Peter launched at it. His kick took the otter under the chin, and turned him over on to his back. Peter overbalanced himself in the effort, and fell into the mud on the other side of the plank, and there was momentarily sufficient space between them to justify the head keeper in firing. The otter had regained its feet, and was preparing to renew the attack, when a charge of No. 4 rolled him over.

Meanwhile, Peter was struggling up to his waist in the mud, and had considerable difficulty in getting on to his plank again. He presented a sorry figure as he reached the dry land, but he

had stuck to the whelps, and afterwards retrieved the bodies of the old otters.

Such an exciting scene had not taken place for a considerable time. Quadling had once before been attacked by an otter, whom he had "cornered" in one of the decoy pipes, and it attacked so vigorously, that the keeper, who had only his stick with him, was obliged to let it escape.

The sale of the skins of the dead otters and the live whelps brought Peter some little money, which Quadling would not touch, and which enabled Peter to obtain some books he needed.

Although few days had such a stirring incident, yet each day was full of pleasure to Peter, in the ardent pursuit of his duties. He was out all day and half the night sometimes in the woods and fields, and marked with delight the daily-increasing beauty of the spring, the tufts of yellow primroses, the banks of fragrant violets, the marshy meadow ablaze with daffodils, the tender green of the larch tufts, the golden haze of the pollen rising from the fir-trees, the gradual clothing of the woods in their emerald mantle, the putting on of the bright dresses, which characterises trees, and birds, and people at Eastertide.



CHAPTER XXXVI.

The nesting season—Stealing eggs of game—Hard-boiled eggs to sit upon—The fight.

WITH the advancing spring, the pheasants' and partridges' nests required considerable attention. The nests of the pheasants in the dry ditches, and the partridges in the hayfields, were so easily discovered by labourers and boys, that it would have been no difficult matter to collect a large quantity of their eggs and sell them. Unfortunately there is such a demand for the eggs of game among great preservers, who hatch and rear a large proportion of their game by the aid of the domestic fowl, that stolen eggs meet with a steady sale.

The estate next to Mrs. Spencer's was in the hands of a gentleman who was a little too anxious to get up a large head of game, and bought eggs of any person without asking questions. This is an extremely unfair proceeding, and led to great grumbling among his neighbours, who justly felt that their preserves were despoiled of eggs to feed Mr. Lawson's. His keeper was a very disagreeable person, at enmity with all the keepers round.

Whenever a nest was found despoiled, it was sure to be put down to some vagabond who would sell the eggs to Mr. Lawson's keeper.

Peter and Quadling, of course, kept a sharp look-out for every nest, and noted the number of eggs; and every now and then,

just as the full complement of eggs was laid, they would disappear, although the keepers could not discover the particular thief, and had no suspicion who it could be, except that it must be one of the labourers employed on the estate.

One day, Peter was strolling along a footpath across some fields, when he came across Susie Saunders sitting on a stile. She did not make way for him to get over, but stopped him, saying, "May I speak to you, Mr. Penniless?"

"Well, what is it, Susie?" said Peter, rather crossly, for he felt that Susie was, to use his own expression, "mobbing" him.

"Would you like to know where the pheasants' eggs go to?"

"That I should, Susie. Do you take them?"

"No, but I know who does."

"Then tell me."

"No, I won't tell you who takes them; but I'll tell you where they go to, and that's to Mr. Lawson's keeper. He gets them cheap, and charges full price to his master."

"The rascal! I didn't think any keeper could be so dishonest."

"Gentlemen keepers can't be, I suppose," said Susie, slyly, while Peter blushed and looked still more cross; "but common keepers may be."

"Well, can you put me in the way of finding him out?"

"I'll tell you what I'll do. I've heard—and you had better not ask me how, or I won't tell you any more—that to-night a hamper of pheasants' and partridges' eggs is to be hidden at the bottom of the old limekiln in the marl-pit just outside your furthest planting. It is on Mr. Lawson's field."

"Yes, I know the place."

"They will be taken there about three o'clock in the morning, and to-morrow night Mr. Lawson's keeper will come for them and take them away."

"And will they be our eggs?"

"Not many of them, they are mostly brought from a distance

this time ; but some that are being taken from your nests while you are talking to me will be among them. Ah ! Mr. Penniless, it is no use looking round, you won't know what way to go."

"And what do you suggest I should do, Susie ?"

"I don't suggest anything. I tell you where the eggs will be ; go and steal them again, if you like. No one dare make any trouble about it. But, I say, you won't tell as I let on to you about this, will you ?"

"Never fear, Susie, no one shall know. I am much obliged to you. Good day." And as Susie did not get off the stile, Peter turned off down the hedge and continued his rounds that way.

"The stuck-up thing !" said Susie to herself, pouting angrily, "he isn't worth making up to. I'll never tell him anything again."

Peter decided to watch all night, and, without telling Quadling of his intention, he went to the plantation Susie had mentioned, and climbed up into the crown of a large hollow tree, where he could be comfortable and command a view of the marl-pit through a rift in the bark.

About two o'clock in the morning he was awakened from a dog-sleep, a sort of "one-eye-and-both-ears-open-sleep," such as I have often enjoyed (!) on a stormy night at a bad anchorage, by the sound of wheels, and he saw, by the aid of the starlight—for there was no moon—a small pony cart being driven down the rough road into the pit. A large object was lifted out of the cart and placed in the fireplace at the foot of the kiln, and some bundles of brushwood replaced over it. Then the trap drove away, but it was so dark that Peter could not distinguish anything by which the two men in it or the pony could be identified.

In the morning he told Quadling what he had seen in the course of his rounds, and what his suspicions were ; and the two keepers proceeded to the plantation, and, after making sure that no one was about, left their own territory and went into

the marl-pit. Removing the brushwood, they found a hamper containing a large quantity of eggs, carefully packed in wooden trays, evidently made for the purpose and often used.

"Here is a villainous thing!" said Quadling, indignantly. "And what are we to do? We daren't take possession of them, as we can't prove that any are ours. Besides, we have no business to be here at all, and we mustn't interfere with Colonel Lawson. I've a good mind to prick every egg and spoil them."

"The marks will be seen," replied Peter. "Wouldn't it be better to carry the hamper to Mr. Knox's, hard-boil every egg, and then take them back again? The keeper will then set them under his hens, and won't find out the fraud for some time."

"Ho! ho! ho!" laughed Quadling, "that is the very thing. The sooner we get the hamper away, the better. Come along."

They soon carried the hamper to Mr. Knox's, which was a quarter of a mile away, and, of course, obtained his hearty co-operation. There was plenty of fire in the kitchen and back kitchen, and abundance of saucepans and coppers, and the boiling went on merrily for two hours, at the end of which time twelve dozen pheasants' eggs and as many partridges' eggs were boiled as hard as stones. In another hour they were carefully repacked and replaced in the kiln, and the keepers went home to dinner in great glee, slapping their thighs and going off into bursts of merriment as they walked along.

The sequel of this story may be told now. Some weeks after Peter was walking through Wetacre, and saw a crowd assembled around two men, who were stripped to their shirts and fighting desperately. Making his way to the spot, Peter saw that it was Mr. Lawson's keeper and Vince, the poaching publican. Peter looked on with inward satisfaction as the two precious rascals punished each other. The crowd was discussing not only the merits of the combatants, but the cause of the quarrel, which had been heard by all, and Peter soon found that the keeper had accused Vince of having played him a trick, by

selling him hard-boiled eggs. His fowls had sat the full time, and then, supposing that the eggs were addled, he had broken them one by one, and found them boiled. Of course Vince thought the keeper was mad, and the misunderstanding culminated in a fight, in which the rascally keeper got considerably the worst of it, and ultimately had to acknowledge the other as the best man.

Peter said not a word in explanation, but left the misunderstanding to continue, and to be a fruitful source of gossip. The occurrence had shown him who was the egg stealer, and a watch on Vince's movements resulted in the discovery of an accomplice in one of the labourers, who was accordingly discharged, and a conviction obtained against both him and Vince, while, in the course of the case, Mr. Lawson's keeper came so prominently forward as a receiver of the stolen eggs that his master was compelled to discharge him, to Quadling's great delight.

There was no hand-rearing of game on Mrs. Spencer's estate, except in the case of eggs laid in nests too near a footpath, and in danger of molestation by boys, or where the old bird was killed by a fox, or, as was the case with two partridges and one pheasant during the hay harvest, all sitting so close that they were struck with the scythe.

Quadling had hit upon a very effective dodge to keep vermin away from the eggs. If a piece of iron be laid near a nest, on the ground, the prowling weasel, stoat, or magpie, takes it for a trap, and will not approach it. Now, on the occasion of a wreck on the coast, a large number of iron hoops, made for barrels, had been cast ashore. Quadling had picked up a quantity of these, and it was his custom, whenever he discovered a partridge's or pheasant's nest, to place one of these iron hoops on the ground, so as to encircle it. The old birds would not leave their eggs, and soon found the hoop to be harmless, but the vermin thought it was a trap, and would not cross it. Not a single nest which was so protected suffered from four-footed or winged poachers.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Spring in the woods. — Ants' nests and pheasants. — Rook shooting. — A practical joke.

AS the spring advanced, so the woodlands grew in beauty and in interest, so that Peter positively revelled in their cool, moist depths. There was an abundance of bird life, which it happily was not necessary to destroy in the interests of game preserving. The numerous nests which he found in the course of his rounds were revisited every time he passed by them. As a youngster he had been no better than his fellows in nest plundering and egg collecting, but now he instinctively endeavoured to atone for his enforced enmity to a section of wild birds and animals by increased solicitude for the other sections. These spring and early summer rambles of his, and the natural history incidents which made them interesting would be worth the telling, had I not in my previous books described many such, and I must perforce avoid repetition. Peter, though a naturalist, was not a collector. When it was necessary, for the sake of the game, to destroy birds or their eggs, he did so as part of his duty, but with no love for so doing, and when he might protect them he was glad to do so. His friend, the doctor, had a small photographic apparatus, and it was his delight, whenever Peter found anything very beautiful or interesting, to go and photograph it in its natural state. Birds sit close when the eggs are close upon hatching, and it was often

possible to get a sweet little picture of a bird on her nest, which would afterwards be enlarged to life-size. The effect of these life studies was as good, and the information they afforded as valuable as the presence of a stuffed specimen, to secure which an innocent life had been sacrificed. Now that photographic apparatus is so cheap, and the dry plate process so easy, I would commend the pursuit to my naturalist readers, as a means of taking valuable notes. A pocket apparatus can be obtained complete for thirty shillings, and its weight is a mere trifle to carry.

The searching for ants' nests in the wood, and the digging them, in order to obtain the so-called ants' eggs* as food for the pheasants which were being brought up by hand, occupied a good deal of time. The nests were dug up and thrust, soil and all, into a sack, and taken to the coops, which were placed on a sunny, sheltered slope of a meadow, not far from the cottage. Pheasants can hardly be hand-reared without a good supply of this natural food. It was curious to see the avidity with which the young birds picked out the fat, white eggs, and the gusto with which they swallowed them.

There were two large rookeries on the estate, and the time was fast approaching when, in accordance with a time-honoured custom, the young rooks had to be thinned. It is a firmly-rooted belief in the minds of country folk that if a certain proportion of the young rooks are not shot off, the rookery will not thrive. Whether the wish to invent some excuse for a little shooting, when no other shooting can be obtained, was



BIRD ON HER NEST.

* The pupæ or chrysalides of the ants are commonly known as ants' eggs.

father to the thought, I do not know. It is possible that if the rooks were allowed to increase too largely in number the colony might be split up, and too large a proportion might depart to another locality, while, by a judicious thinning, there is room left for a strong colony to remain and thrive without breaking up. However this may be, Quadling believed it necessary that a day's rook-shooting should take place each year, and as soon as the young rooks were able to take short flights from tree to tree, a party was organised. Young Spencer was not able to be present, nor would he have cared much for it if he had; but his cousin Harvey came down. Harvey was enjoying a short interregnum of holiday between school and college, and was endeavouring to make the most of his time. He and Peter were inclined to become fast friends, in spite of the disparity of their positions. Both of them were big and strong for their age. They were alike frank and simple-minded, honest and manly, and had the same tastes. It was only Peter's diffidence which kept them from a close companionship; but try as he would, he found it difficult to act his part of a gamekeeper so well with Harvey as with others. Harvey was keen enough to notice the difference between Peter's manner to others and his manner to him, and he felt certain that there was some mystery underlying Peter's present position. He was sure, however, that there was no harm in the mystery, and that the explanation of it would be to Peter's credit, and not being too impatient or curious, he let things take their chance, and kept silence as to his suspicions. In Gerard's absence, Peter was the more glad of Harvey's company, and for two or three days before the rook shooting the latter accompanied Peter on most of his rounds through the woods, and was introduced to Peter's various friends of fur and feather, from the bright-eyed squirrel, which dodged them half playfully around a tree trunk, to the tiny goldcrest, which sat on her swaying nest, suspended beneath the branch of a fir tree.

On one of these rambles Harvey caught sight of an imitation pheasant on a bough, and in reply to his enquiries, Peter told him why such imitations were made and used.

"I say, Peter, that puts a bit of fun into my head. You know I've persuaded old Quadling not to allow any shotgun to be used at the rook shooting. Everyone has to have a pea-rifle, and shoot with bullets. It isn't fair to shoot a sitting rook with shot. It hasn't a chance, but with a rifle it exercises one's skill, don't you see, and gives the bird a chance of escape. Now, what do you say to privately shooting half-a-dozen young rooks, and fastening them up in the branches with wire, so that the fellows may go on potting at them for ever so long? Won't that be fun?"

Peter readily assented, and very early the next morning Peter took his airgun and Harvey his pea-rifle, and met at one of the rookeries, where, between them, they were not long in bringing down six plump young rooks. Then they climbed various trees, not in the rookery itself, for that would have raised such a clamour that somebody's attention would have surely been attracted to their proceedings, but trees at a little distance in the hedgerows. They climbed as high up and



SQUIRREL.

crawled out as far along the slender branches as they dared, and, with string and soft copper wire, secured the rooks to the forks of the branches in as natural a position as they could. The copper wire wound round the bodies and necks of the birds under the feathers sustained them in a lifelike attitude, and from the ground there was nothing in their appearance to invite suspicion.

"I say, Peter, that's an uncommonly troublesome job," exclaimed Harvey, sliding down his last tree. "I only hope that all our labour won't be in vain."

"No fear, sir. Somebody is sure to be taken in. The curate is coming, and he is shortsighted, and I don't think he is much used to shooting. He has hired a pea-rifle from Crostwich, and has never used one before."

"Yes; but I should like to take old Quadling or the doctor in. They are both so knowing. Now I must be off to breakfast. We shall meet here at ten o'clock."

At ten o'clock the party assembled at the large rookery. Harvey took the place of host, and the curate, the doctor, Mr. Knox, and a Mr. Randall, who was Harvey's coach or private tutor, formed the guests.

They each had a pea-rifle, and so had Quadling, but the old chap, though a good shot with a gun, doubted his powers with so small a weapon, and so he had provided himself with a stick about eight feet long, sharpened at one end, and with crutches or natural forks at different heights. When he had selected a rook at which to shoot, he would deliberately thrust his stick into the ground, rest his small rifle on a fork, take a long, slow aim, and the death of that rook was certain. He was proud of this dodge, and refused to be laughed out of it; and he certainly killed the greatest number of birds during the day.

The rookery was situated on a slight eminence, from which the meadows sloped away down to the trout stream, and the fences near the rookery were dotted with smaller trees.

"Now, gentlemen, you can begin, but mind you only shoot the young ones."

"And how can I tell the young from the old, out of all that noisy crowd?" asked the curate.

"Why, the old birds have white beaks and the young ones have black ones. The black feathers round the base of the beak wear off after a time and only the young birds have them."

"Thank you; but at that distance I shan't be able to see all that."

"Never mind, sir," said Quadling, "after the first few shots the old birds will fly off out of shot and you can then shoot at anything sitting on a branch, and be sure it is a young one."

The old rooks were circling overhead, and flying from branch to branch cawing loudly, being fully aware that something dreadful was up. As the rifles began to crack rapidly, and many swarthy and plump young rooks fell headlong to the ground, the old birds took the alarm and kept out of reach, still keeping up a dire commotion. Each man took up his position and fired away for some time, without moving, at the birds within reach, while Peter and a watcher picked up the falling birds, often catching them as they fell; and depositing them in separate lots for each shooter.

As the young rooks came to understand how perilous was their position they left the rookery in twos and threes for the trees in the hedgerows—where the guns followed them. Harvey 'drew a bead' on one rook, and evidently hit it, for some feathers flew out, but it did not fall. Then it flashed upon him that he was the first victim of his own joke. He had forgotten the trap in the excitement of the moment. He looked round to see if Peter had seen his discomfiture, and Peter had seen, and gave him a pantomimic clap of the hands. The next victim was Randall. He shot twice at one of the dummies, and, concluding

he had missed, he said that he would try Wimbledon fashion. He accordingly lay down flat on his back with his knees up, and, resting the rifle barrel on his knee he fired again, and away went the rook's tail, but the bird did not drop. The curate was rapidly and savagely firing at another dummy, and Quadling was sticking up his rest and carefully aiming at another.

Harvey joined Peter, and watched the proceedings, having hard work to prevent their laughter being audible. Crack went Quadling's rifle; the rook shook a little, but retained its position, while Quadling calmly looked on, expecting it to drop each moment.

"Well, that is a rum bird! Why doesn't it open its wings and caw like the others when they are shot at? I'll send another bullet at it. Why, I hit it—because I saw the feathers fly! What's the matter with the bird? Peter, just shin up that tree, and shake that rook down. It's stuck."

Peter climbed the tree, and commenced to shake vigorously, but still the bird retained its position.

"I've got a rook that won't come down also," said Randall.

"So have I," said the curate.

"And so have I," shouted Knox from a little distance.

"The birds are bewitched," said the doctor. "Can't you get out on to the branch, Peter?"

"It is so thin—it may break with my weight."

"Here, Jack, run home and fetch a saw," said Quadling, to the watcher. When the saw arrived, Peter had to re-ascend the tree and saw off the branch. When it fell, Quadling took hold of the rook, and, of course, discovered the trick. He said nothing, but looked at Peter, who bore his glance with unmoved gravity.

"It is all right," cried Harvey, as soon as he could speak for laughter. "I did it, and you are all beautifully sold."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mr. Randall, "I've fired six shots at my bird."

"And I've fired twelve at mine," said the curate, "for I felt my honour was at stake."

"A sad waste of powder and lead," grumbled Quadling.

Afterwards it was amusing to see how each man suspected that every fresh bird perched on a branch was a fraud, and forbore to fire until a movement showed him it was really alive.

"I must say, Harvey, you have introduced a new excitement into rook-shooting," remarked Mr. Randall, as, after closely scanning a motionless rook, he declined to shoot, and then saw the supposed dummy fly away.

"We will go to the other rookery now," answered Harvey.

"Are there any frauds there?"

"No, upon my honour there are not. You may shoot in peace."

The same scene of "thinning out" was re-enacted at the second rookery, and as the guns had warmed to their work, and lost any nervousness they might have possessed, their shooting was more accurate, and the rooks fell in greater numbers. At last it was thought that they had shot a sufficient quantity, and the signal was given to stop. The "game" was counted, and the keepers returned to their cottage, whilst the others went to lunch with Harvey at the Hall.

Peter had the pleasure of reading a long letter from Gerard, which had arrived while he was out. Gerard was getting on famously. His pupil was a boy too delicate to go to school, and the only child of a Newcastle merchant. Gerard liked both his pupil and the father very much, and said that they were very kind to him. The father (Mr. Hedley) was a great fisherman, and as Gerard was also, they fraternised on that score, and made many excursions together. Gerard's enjoyment of these excursions moved him to try and describe them, and one day later on Peter was surprised by the receipt of a *Field*, addressed in Gerard's writing, and inside, marked with large blue pencil crosses, so that there could be no mistake, was an article with

the name "Gerard Longley" at the foot. Peter was as delighted as if the article had been his own first appearance in type, and no joy, I think, can equal that of the budding author when he sees his first contribution in print. In the next chapter Gerard shall speak for himself.



CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Trout Fishing on the Redewater.

AT Easter there is a great exodus of anglers from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and all the places where free trout fishing is to be had are thronged with followers of the gentle art. It was difficult to choose any spot where one might go with any reasonable prospect of sport; but some one suggested Horsley-on-Redewater, and highly praised both the place and the inn, so I wrote in good time and secured rooms.

The Redewater takes its rise on Carter Fell, in the extreme west of Northumberland, on the border, and flows south-eastward until it joins the North Tyne at Redesmouth, near Bellingham. It is as fine a trout stream as one could wish to see, and its tributary burns, of which there are many, are all full of trout. There is a good deal of free fishing on it, and it is well worth a visit. Our route from Newcastle was by Morpeth, then along the Wansbeck Railway to Woodburn Station. From thence to Horsley is a drive or walk of eight miles.

My visit there was at Easter, and we started on the Thursday. It was a delightful morning, with a southerly wind, which, however, at noon, turned to the eastward; and as we journeyed northward the sky to windward began to grow thick, and give every sign of the coming thick mist and driving rain which are the usual accompaniments of the east wind in Northumberland

I did not grumble, for it is my usual fishing weather, and I am used to it, and do not expect any other.

At Woodburn a carriage was waiting for us, and as we got in we saw many other anglers starting off to walk, and we hated them with all the virulence of which we were capable. "There will be a crowd of them there," growled my companion, "and we shall get no sport."

"At least we shall get fresh air," replied I—a saying with which I have often to console myself. At Woodburn there is some fine fishing, and good accommodation. As we crossed the river we saw why it was called Redewater, for it was coming down swift and red. We drove up and down the steep bleak hills, while the mist lay on the Ottercaps and descended into the valleys. The lapwings cried mournfully as they tossed and floated on the steady east wind; and the shepherds striding across the fell had their plaids wrapped thickly round their throats. We were on classic ground, for there was the little village of Otterburn, where the Percy and the Douglas fought. It was an oasis among the hills, for which many of the anglers turned off, and so reduced the following, which easily kept pace with us up and down the hills. There is free fishing at Otterburn, but I do not know to what extent. A little further on we came to Elishaw Bridge, and from this point, for four miles up, the fishing is free. Two miles further brought us to the Redesdale Arms, kept by Mr. Dixon, where we were to stay. We found that my companion—whom I will call the Senior—his son, a boy of twelve, and myself, were to share the same sitting-room with two young fellows. It was then six o'clock, and they had just come in from fishing. They had been the only anglers staying at the inn for a week, and now there were nineteen anglers staying there. It did not look well for sport on four miles of water. Two turned out to be capital fellows, and before the evening was over we were excellent friends. The inn is a large, rambling place, with plenty of room. It stands

almost by itself on the hillside, sheltered on the north by a fir plantation, the valley in front with the stream winding through it; and on the other side the hill, mid rock and heather, are the ruins of an ancient peel tower.

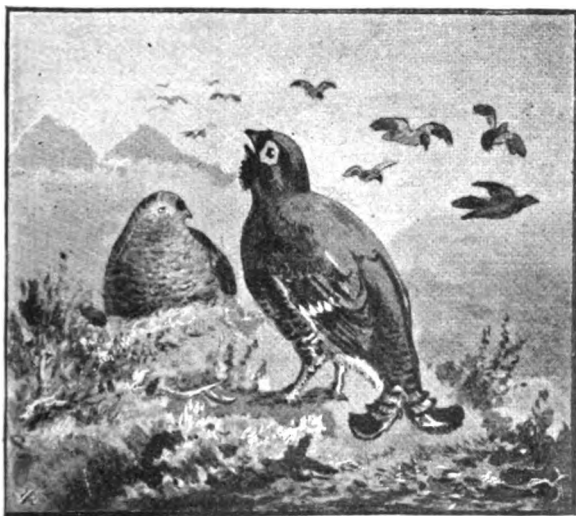
In the morning I woke early, and jumped out of bed to look at the weather. The river had fined down considerably, and looked in good order; but the wind was still in the east, and up the long valley came the vanguard of the misty showers which would prevail during the day. We did not hurry over breakfast, for past experience had taught me that the other men would probably rush off as early as possible to the uttermost parts of the fishing, leaving that close to the inn unoccupied. And so it proved. When we turned out at half-past nine, there was not a fisherman in sight. The Senior went down the stream a mile or so to fish up, and I commenced just below the inn. It was bitterly cold, and there was no sign of any fly on the water, so I first tried the worm; but, after catching several smelts, both salmon and bull-trout, which, of course, had to be tenderly returned, and not a single trout, I changed to flies—the March brown, blue dun, and another which I have forgotten. I waded up the stream, and, after being dreadfully bothered by the smelts, I caught a brace of small trout. Then there came a shower of sleet, and after that a faint gleam of sunshine. I was then at the foot of a deep pool at the rapid, below a peculiarly drunken suspension foot-bridge. Out of this pool the Senior had once taken a trout of two pounds and a half with the worm; and I had just changed to the worm, when the pool actually shone with the glancing trout as they rushed to the surface after a lot of March browns which had just come on the water. I changed back again with all the rapidity I could, and found that more haste less speed. The rise was dying away as I cast, but I got three or four very nice sizeable trout in excellent condition. Above the very swinging bridge is an excellent stretch of water, rapid, and broken up by big stones into many

capital streams and eddies. A looker-on told me that good trout were always to be had here, so I proceeded to whip it diligently. There were trees on either side, and it was more sheltered; so, although there was no sign of any fly on the water, I took several trout of a quarter of a pound in weight, and many fingerlings, which, with the numerous smelts, I returned, for I do not like to murder the innocents. After fishing a quarter of a mile up, I met the first of the other anglers coming down, with others in view behind him; so I sat down behind a rock, and ate my lunch and supped my whisky—the latter a necessity for this northern climate. I found that I had thirteen good-sized trout, which was more than I expected to get on such a day. The Senior presently joined me, and we gave up fishing, and watched the numerous anglers coming down, nearly all with empty baskets. The Senior also had thirteen fish; so had one of our sitting-room companions; no one else had any to speak of.

The next day (Saturday) was, if anything, worse. The east wind and the driving mist and rain were something awful. We nevertheless went about three miles up the river to some preserved water, where we had leave to fish. The river seemed as full of trout as it could be, and, notwithstanding the vileness of the day, I finished up with three dozen as nice fish as one could like to see, bright-coloured and of uniform size, but only one up to half a pound. Of samlets and tiny trout, I must have caught and returned six or eight dozen. The stream was a delightful mixture of rapids and pools, every inch of it fishable; and had it been a favourable day, I should have caught my twelve dozen to a certainty. As it was, I had to fish very carefully, letting the fly sink, and catching most in the deeper streams and pools. The March brown was the favourite fly, and I found that a yellow body made it far more killing. All the anglers noticed this that day, and at night there was a hunt among the antimacassars for pieces of yellow wool.

The Senior, who is a splendid fisherman, was very unlucky. He had just bought a spliced cane fly-rod, which threw a perfect line at first; but in an hour or two became sodden with the wet, and doubled up like paper. It spoiled his fishing completely, and he only got eighteen trout.

There was a big heap of trout in the kitchen at the inn that night, but none had been so lucky as I had. We finished up



BLACKCOCK.

with a very jolly evening over whist and whisky, and fought our angling battles over again.

Sunday was a charming day, as a matter of course, seeing that we could not fish. The wind was from the south-west, the sun shone brightly, and we had a pleasant ramble in the morning on the opposite hill, and to a most picturesque catarnact on the Windburn, which runs into the Rede a mile above the inn on

the opposite side, and has plenty of trout in it. In the afternoon some went to church, and others to a very interesting Roman camp at Bellshields.

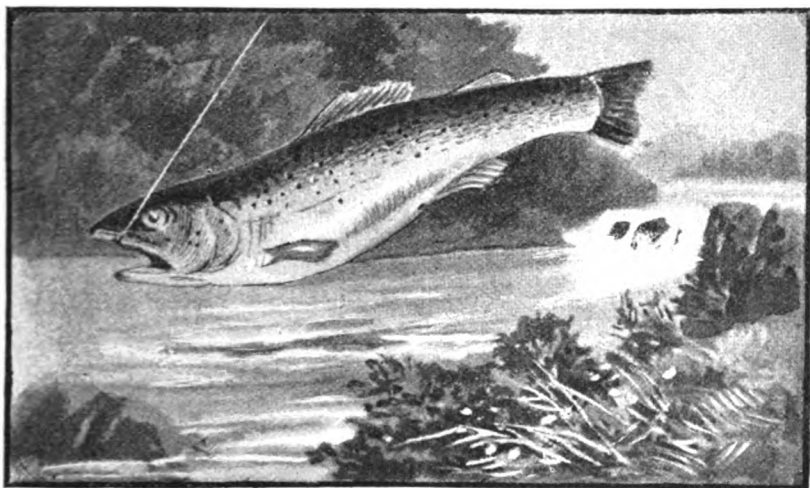
The river was red and swollen, but running down rapidly, and everything betokened a splendid fishing day for the morrow; while all down the long valley the river sparkled red in the sun as it meandered among the green boughs and heather-crowned rocks. The blackcock crowed on the hill, the lapwings chased and fought the carrion crows away from their eggs, or from the spots where their eggs would soon be laid, the heron flew lazily down the river, and the kestrel swept defiantly close over the keeper's house; and as the hills shut out the sun, and the gloaming deepened, we went indoors and complacently thought the east wind had stayed its cruel hand for a while.

But, no! In the morning we saw the sky gloomy, and the dreaded mist slowly creeping up the trough of the valley, and—well, one could not repress a little grumbling, to put it as mildly as possible. I hope it is not wrong to say so, but I really often feel that I could bring on an east wind by appointing a day to go a-fishing.

Well, we started in a trap, and drove about five miles up the river to some open water. The view was striking in its bareness and boldness. It had just two factors—the bleak mountain-side and the dark stream in the hollow. The water was in good condition, but the fish were not in rising humour; even the samlets would not take the fly. The Senior went up the river fishing with worm, and after an interval I followed with the fly. I soon found that the only way was to fish the deeper streams and pools, and let the flies sink deep. After a long time I caught a quarter-pounder; then two of the same size at once, the prettiest fish imaginable. A few more followed in a deadish piece of water, and then I came to a strong rapid. While fishing the lower part of this I had a pluck from a heavy fish,

which gave a roll over and broke away. In five minutes I had another rise, and caught sight of a fine yellow side as that, too, broke away. Upon examining my flies I found that the steel of one had bent nearly straight.

It was now getting well on in the afternoon. I was icy cold and wet through, and the fine rain came down with steady persistence. The Senior was in sight, fishing steadily away, a



A GAME STRUGGLE.

quarter of a mile above, in what is said to be the finest worm-water in Northumberland, and I really felt quite beaten and disheartened by the weather. Fishing seemed no good. I could not expect to get hold of another big one, so I tried to amuse myself by seeing how long a line I could throw. I had got a very long line out, and was trying to pick it off the water cleverly when I felt a fish. He made a grand rush up the stream, leaped once out of the water, then the line was slack.

I was beginning to reel in mournfully when I saw him nosing in close under my feet with the fly still in his mouth. I rushed back up the stony bank to get my line taut again, and just as I got it so he leaped fairly out of the water on to the stones, and I rushed down and nabbed him. He was an ounce over a pound and a half, and a well-fed, handsome fish. His diet had been slugs and worms, of which he ejected a handful.

I walked up and joined the Senior, whom I found in ecstasies of rage at having just lost a large fish, which slipped away at the moment he seemed to be landed. We found we each had eighteen fish, all of them nice ones. I think if I had taken to the minnow I should have done more; but we were so exceedingly cold that we put our rods up and trudged through the long tussocky grass of the wet hillside until we reached the road, and we cowered together in a slight hollow and drank the last of the whisky while waiting for the trap to come to us.

We were to leave the next day at noon, and did not fish in the morning. Just as we were driving away to the station the sun burst out, and those we left behind had good sport.

I should like nothing better than to have five miles of such a river as the Rede; and for free fishing Horsley is the best station I know. In addition to the river, there are the Windburn, the Sills-burn, Chattlehope-burn, and Cottonhope-burn—all full of fish.



CHAPTER XXXIX.

An East Anglian trout-stream.—Dry fly-fishing.—The cross-line poachers.—Chase and Capture.—A large trout.

THE trout stream, that has been several times mentioned as flowing through the property, was not like the rocky northern streams where Gerard had been enjoying himself, nor was it even so brisk in its movement as those tributaries of the Severn to which Peter had been accustomed. But it was, nevertheless, a pleasant stream to wander by, rod in hand, and its trout, though not very numerous, were large. When Mr. Spencer was alive, it was a rule that all fish under half a pound in weight should be put back, and the spotted beauties ran up to four and five pounds in weight, and occasionally nearly double that size.

It flowed placidly between meandering banks, where the lush grasses and waterside flowers were bathed by the brimming stream.

It “dimpled” along under the arching branches of the woodlands, where the gnarled roots made great hiding-places for the lusty trout. It spread into lilled bays, where, too often, a jack lurked cheek-by-jowl with the trout, whose size alone secured them from his molestation. Only occasionally did it break into rapids and ripples over gravelly fords, although art had assisted Nature in this respect. There were several dams and obstructions, purposely arranged to create a current or fall, where the

quiet gurgle of the stream was exchanged for the foam and dash of broken water, the sound of which is such sweet music to the ears of a man from hilly countries. But, for the most part, the little river was only obstructed by masses of swaying weed, between which the fat trout swam, and rose lazily to seize the flies floating on the surface.

Harvey spent many days trying for the big trout, and took Peter as his attendant and companion. He, however, insisted on Peter fishing as well as himself, and divided the reaches equally between them. But a cold east wind was blowing, and they had tried fly, minnow, and even worm with but scant success, and had not inveigled any of the big ones.

One morning, however, when Peter awoke, he was immediately sensible that the wind had changed. Throwing his window open, he felt the balmy breath of the south wind, and the sparrows twittering in the thatch, the woodpecker tapping a dead tree just across the garden, the bees early astir, the starlings in the disused dovecote, and the newly-arrived martens seemed to him to exult in the warmer wind. As Peter had had a long night-round he was not due to get up so early, so he opened his book-box, and, taking out a treatise on scientific farming, which he had recently bought, he lay down again, and commenced to read in bed. But he fell asleep over his book, and when he awoke he saw Harvey standing over him.

"Wake up, Peter, here is a southerly wind. We shall nail those spanking trout to-day. Look sharp and dress and get your breakfast, and we will be off. It is eight o'clock."

"Good gracious!" cried Peter, springing up. "I have overslept myself."

"No wonder, Peter, if you go to bed reading such books as these. What a rum chap you are!" said Harvey, eyeing poor Peter's books and note-book with much curiosity. Peter said nothing, but looked uncomfortable, and Harvey considerably made no further remark, but went out into the garden. He

afterwards took a bowl of bread-and-milk with Peter, and then the two youngsters started off for the stream, Harvey so impatient to begin that he put his rod together as they walked.

The course of the river was so sinuous, that one large meadow

only divided two bends of it, which by water were a mile and a half apart, the stream doubling almost upon itself. When they reached this neck of land, Harvey suggested that they should begin at this meadow and fish, the one up stream and the other down, until they met, and that they should toss up for choice; but Peter, knowing that the best sport would be obtained by the one fishing up



WOODPECKER.

stream, and so approaching the wary trout from behind, insisted on Harvey taking that course. So, separated by the width of the meadow, they commenced to fish away from each other.

The meadow was ablaze with the yellow light of buttercup, celandine, and marsh-marigold; the sky was a soft blue, flecked with slowly moving clouds, and from the brightness above many

a dark smudge in the water. As Peter cautiously approached the water he saw that the trout were on the feed. Here and there a circle formed on the water told where a fly had been sucked under.

Peter used but one fly, a good-sized March brown, made rather thick in the body. This he used dry, that is, between each cast he waved his line in the air several times to dry the feathers, so that when the fly fell on the water it would float.

Determined, if possible, to get a big fish, he went to work warily. Instead of casting at random, he watched until he marked the position of a good trout, which was rising steadily at intervals, evidently well on the feed. Then, making a detour, he approached it up stream, crawling on hands and knees. When he had come within casting distance, he raised his rod; the line circled in the air behind him, and then flew straight out; a slight check, and the fly shot forward and fell on the water in advance of the line.

"There, I never made a better cast! He ought to have it."

As the fly floated down the water lane between the weeds, the trout rose quietly in a business kind of way; his snout appeared for a moment above the water, and his jaws sucked in the fly. Then Peter gave a slight upward stroke with his wrist, and the next instant he was on his feet, and engaged in the most exciting of combats. The trout, as soon as it felt the steel, jumped into the air; then it rushed madly up and down stream; then tried sulking under a bed of weeds, into which Peter had to wade before he could dislodge it, and finally gave in, and Peter towed it ashore on a shallow, and, seizing it in his hands, flung it on to the bank. It was a beautiful bright, red-spotted trout of four and a half pounds in weight, and Peter gazed triumphantly at it for some time ere he consigned it carefully to his bag, in a bed of sweet meadow grass.

Peter went on down the stream, keeping at a distance from the bank and watching for the rises. When satisfied that the

rising fish was over a pound weight, he would approach it from below as before. The next two fish he hooked he lost. One got foul of a weed and broke his hold, and the other burst itself free in a splendid somersault. Then Peter secured two in quick succession, each about two pounds. Then he spotted a very large one rising all by itself in a rather unlikely stretch of deadish water. Peter did his very best to circumvent it. It would come and look at his fly, and then leave it and suck down a natural one. He tried every likely fly in his book, but in vain. The fish took a look at them all, but would not be deceived. As the trout was not at all frightened at the constant suspicious change of temptation, but kept on feeding steadily, Peter went on casting, giving the trout a rest at intervals. He stayed by the fish fully an hour, and then he thought he would give it up for a while.

As he turned to proceed, his sharp eye caught something suspicious further down the stream. The sheep in the meadow were all gazing towards the water, and were following some object with their natural curiosity.

"What's there, I wonder?" said Peter to himself. "Mr. Harvey can't have got so far up yet, and no one else should be there. There goes a heron disturbed by somebody. Somebody's poaching."

So Peter ran crouching until he reached a small thicket where he could hide himself. Presently he caught sight of two persons, one on each bank, crouching low to avoid observation, and proceeding up the stream. Each of them held a rod, and between the rods was a line stretched across the stream, with shorter lines dependent from it, on which were artificial flies. They were engaged in the blackguardly device of cross-lining.

Peter watched eagerly for their coming nearer. He had no stick with him, but to provide for a tussle he took his rod to pieces and grasped the butt, which was a bit of greenheart, springy and heavy. Peter recognised the man on the further

bank as a "ne'er-do-weel" cobbler, of Wetacre, who was suspected of a *penchant* for poaching. The one on his side he did not know, but he was a long, lathy fellow, looking like a gipsy. Just as they got opposite to him they hooked a small trout, and one of them letting out line, the other drew it in and pocketed it. Out jumped Peter with a rush. Off went the cobbler on his side, and the gipsy did ditto, jumping a dyke, into which Peter, in his haste, slipped. Scrambling out, he went "hot-foot" after the fellow, who soon had fifty yards' start. Peter could only hold him, but could not gain, and the man, to lighten his load, emptied his pockets as he ran of several fine trout. Away they sped over the meadows, the man making for a ford. Peter felt that he had met with his match in running, and feared that the man would give him the slip. Just then, however, he caught the glint of the sunlight on Harvey's varnished rod, and collecting all his breath, he shouted out to him to stop the fugitive. Harvey caught the sound, and running up the bank, instantly "twigged" the position of matters, and started to intercept the fellow. The latter turned off at a tangent, and made for a place where he would have to swim for it. He crossed Harvey within ten yards, and the youngster, knowing that he could not catch him, picked up a stick and threw it at his legs. It tripped the fellow up, and he came an awful cropper on his breast. Before he could recover himself both Harvey and Peter were sitting on him mopping their faces and coolly awaiting until they got their breath before they took any notice of his objurgations.

"Let me go, you——" &c., &c.

"Got a big 'un this time, Peter!" said Harvey. "What shall we do with him?"

"Take him off to Quadling, I suppose."

"Oh, bother, that will spoil our day's fishing. I've got a brace of beauties, and the fish are rising like mad. I can't leave the river. Why not tie the beggar to a tree?"

"I don't think he would stay there long, sir. I tell you what we might do—keep still, you hound!" to the man who was struggling to dislodge them.

"What?"

"Why, take off his coat, waistcoat, and hat, and let him go. We shall be bound to get him again then, as, if he doesn't come for them and own them, he can be easily traced."

"Capital! Off with them!"

But the man was inclined to show fight, and it was necessary for Peter to give him one or two hard cuffs on the side of the head before he could be persuaded that discretion was the better part of valour. Doffed of his outer garments, he looked a sorry customer, and he slunk off, taking, by way of a parting gift, a brace of kicks, heartily given.

"Well, that's an agreeable bit of diversion," said Harvey, laughing, as he watched the fellow disappear; "but what is the next thing on the programme?"

"If you fish further up stream, you will go over the ground they have been. You may depend they will have frightened every fish. You had better come and catch a monster that I've been besieging for an hour. It is a six pounder if it is an ounce, and won't look at a dry fly, but perhaps it may at a wet one."

Harvey was fishing with a cast of three flies in the ordinary, or wet, way. They therefore rolled up the clothes into a bundle, and went on the back track of the poacher. They picked up five trout from half a pound to a pound in weight, which he had thrown away, and then broke the rods, which were simply long, pliant ash sticks cut from a young tree. The cross line was a good piece of stained gut, and the flies, though home-made, were well made. Of these they took possession. The cobbler had got clear away with the fish, if he had any.

"Now for the big one, Mr. Harvey. He is feeding just beyond that long bunch of weed. There, he rose then!"

"What a small circle he makes! I should have taken him for a very small one."

"Creep a little nearer. Can you see him now?"

"Oh, yes, what a beauty! Oh, dear, I shall never be able to hook it. He makes me as nervous as possible. Do you try him again with your fly."

Nothing loth, Peter did so; but his fly was unnoticed.

"Now do you try, and let the flies sink well in the water."

Harvey did so, and let the flies sink out of sight. As the line passed over the spot, they noticed a slight jerking of it. Harvey answered with a strike, and then he was fast in his first big fish. And what a tussle it was! The fish fought like a salmon, springing into the air time after time, and madly darting here and there, but never stooping to sulk under a weed; while Harvey, who had looked upon the encounter with the poacher as merely a bit of fun, was white with excitement and trembling with nervousness. But he played the fish remarkably well, and Peter, instead of shouting contradictory advice, as the best of keepers will sometimes do at such times, to the great perturbation of their employers, he held his peace, and stood ready with Harvey's landing net. When at length the trout was safely on the grass, Harvey actually kissed it in his delight.

"There! I'll not spoil the lark of that struggle by hooking another trout to-day! I'll have this one stuffed to put in my rooms at college. Isn't it a beauty? We and the poacher have got enough fish out of the water for one day."

He was a little sorry for his forbearance, though, afterwards, for the wind changed again to the east, and, after fishing diligently every day for another week without any success, he had to leave.

CHAPTER XL.

Gerard's visit to the Farne Islands.

A GAIN let Gerard describe his adventures in the north. This is what he writes :—

“There are few spots on our shores so interesting to naturalists as the Farne Islands, lying off the coast of Northumberland, opposite the grand and massive castle of Bamborough, the breeding places of countless numbers of sea-fowl. I had been anxious to see them, and had made one unsuccessful attempt to get there in the teeth of wind and rain. It is difficult to land at all times, save on those rare days of perfect calm, and with even a little wind and sea it is impossible. At Whitsuntide I fulfilled my desire, and persuaded three friends (not naturalists, however) to accompany me. We went by train to Lucker station, and started to walk to Bamborough, some four miles distant. We could see nothing of the castle or the coast, until a sudden turn in the road revealed them to us with startling suddenness. The castle towering on its basaltic crag, and outlined against a deep blue sea, and away beyond all the islands, visible with wonderful distinctness, deep brown crags and dull green turf, fringed with the brilliant white of the surf which broke against them, formed a picture not soon to be forgotten.

“We obtained quarters at the Crewe Arms, one of the nicest inns it has been my lot to enter, and there we encountered no less than four ornithological acquaintances, also bound for the

Farnes. Two of them invited us to join them, and, as they had secured a boat, and made all necessary arrangements, we were glad to do so. A walk to Holy Island was then proposed. We started, but it was hot, and the island was hazy in the distance, so we stopped on the bank of a little river at the south end of the flat sands, between us and the island, and sat and talked, and rambled amid the rock pools, finding beautiful sea anemones, and all sorts of shells and sea-creatures, among the seaweed, and watched the various gulls, kittiwakes, oyster-catchers, cormorants, and shore and sea birds, which were close around us. To those naturalists who care for the treasures of the seashore, few stretches of coast could be more rich than this very rugged, basaltic, fissured, cleft mile or two. More than all, however, we watched the surf. There must have been a heavy gale out at sea, for there was such a swell on as is rarely known. Great dark green rollers came swiftly in, their tops growing thinner and sharper, and of a brighter green, until they broke in dazzling foam, and with stupendous crash and roar. The spray from them as they spread rapidly over Fenham Flats, hung in the air in a heavy mist, to which the westering sun gave unwonted splendour. Over Holy Island the clouds were hard and threatening, and at the Great Farne there was a pillar of white, at quick intervals that showed the "churn" was busily at work.

"Yet the next morning was fine, and we started early to walk to North Sunderland, three miles away, where, at a public-house, kept by one Rogerson, boats can be obtained. Rogerson's two sons were to go with us, and while they were getting ready, we watched the cobbles in the little harbour discharging the crabs they had taken in their crab-pots that morning. The heavy swell had been favourable to their fishing, inasmuch as it made the crustaceans move about. The boat next to us filled four barrels with crabs, each barrel, we counted, holding about a hundred. The harbour is a trap to catch seaweed, for it lay there in thick masses, emitting a powerful odour. Soon we

were afloat, and dashing along close-hauled with a nice breeze, the coble topping the rollers in fine style. Presently we got among the birds, and the numbers increased until the sea and the air were literally thick with them. The guillemots were in dense flocks, which parted as we advanced and closed behind us, and flew close over our heads chattering their loudest. The puffins, with their coloured beaks and red legs, the latter stretched widely apart as they fly, diving continually with great celerity, and gulls of different kinds, kittiwakes, Sandwich, and common terns, and, most graceful of all, the Arctic terns. The latter toyed in the air even more gracefully than swallows, darting down to the surface, just dipping in their long bills and rising again. They kept together in small companies, and danced up and down, and here and there, like gnats in a sunbeam. Such a scene of animation is difficult to describe. The birds did not seem much afraid of us, and we might have struck them with the oars. This scene of swimming, diving, flying, chattering, noisy creatures, accompanied us the whole time we were on the water; and it was impossible even to guess at the numbers of the birds around us.

“We sailed, ever accompanied by the birds, past all the islands to the Longstone, on which the lighthouse is built. The narrow passage between this and the next island was a foaming, raging, boiling sea, which it seemed mad to enter, yet the coble sailed gallantly over it, and ran into a cove of comparative shelter. We could not land here; but the sails were lowered, and the men took to the oars and pulled us round to the other side of the lighthouse, where we succeeded in effecting a landing. I have not space to describe the lighthouse, famous for its associations with Grace Darling. Leaving there, we sailed back to the Staples. On a low, barren, rocky islet the puffins were packed wherever there was standing room. We tried in vain to land; the heavy swell which thundered on the eastern side of each island was also turbulent on the sheltered side. We

backed the boat again and again to within a few feet of the rock, and then had to pull away our hardest, as the swell lifted us and threatened to dash us to pieces. The puffins were all looking at us and screaming and scolding in the most absurd way. At last the boatman said it was not safe to remain so close to the rock, and we were obliged to retire, leaving the birds secure, many of them at once hurrying on to their burrows. While we were rowing away we saw, not twenty yards off, a large grey head, with full, dark eyes, pop out of the water and stare at us. After the first startled pause we perceived that it was a seal. We were highly delighted, and thought the sight of him worth the whole journey. He swam slowly past the boat two or three feet down in the clear water, and then rose close astern to have another good look at us. Another seal was seen the same day near to the mainland by some friends. We now landed, but with difficulty, upon the largest of the Staples. We walked across some very soft and spongy turf, whereon were innumerable holes, out of one of which we unearthed a puffin, just to say 'how-d'ye-do' to him, and then turned him loose. The gulls were standing every yard or so, motionless, simply moving their heads and following our movements with their bright eyes. Here and there we found a nest and eggs, but the keeper had been round early and taken all he could find. The vacant, meagre nests were very abundant. The ground rose until the grass disappeared, and we were standing on iron rock, riven and fissured as only basalt is. And then we saw a wonderful sight. A chasm of twelve or fourteen feet in width, and forty feet in depth, the sea roaring at the bottom, separates you from rocks of equal height, but limited in extent, columns of basalt flat on the tops. The sides of the rock you may see, but not the tops, by reason of the innumerable guillemots which are sitting upon them. If we pitched a pebble on to the living mass, there was not room for it at once to slip on to the rock. The birds were as tightly packed together as possible.

boys, probably his sons, were eating their dinner of eggs and bread. He opened a drawer containing picked specimens of guillemots' eggs, and one which he avowed was a razorbill's; but as we had not seen the bird laying it, we pronounced it only a narrow egg of the guillemot. Close by the cottage, in the long grass, was an eider-duck's nest full of eggs, snugly packed in the warm down. The eggs had been sat upon, and our collectors respected the nest.

Leaving this island, our ears now becoming accustomed to the din of bird-voices and our eyes to the glancing of their wings, we landed on one of the wide openings. The terns had laid their eggs singly amid the stones in very great numbers, and many were inadvertently trodden upon. All this time the poor Sandwich terns dashed about our heads, screaming loudly. Between the islands, in a quiet bay, we saw several eider-ducks, and on the next island, which, if I remember rightly, is one of the Noxies, we found two more eider-ducks' nests full of eggs, which, alas! were taken. On this island the terns laid on the grass, and their eggs were scattered about everywhere. I did not notice many of the other kinds of sea-fowl which breed on these islands; but we had not much time for quiet observation, and the presence of the commoner birds was too obtrusive and constant to permit us to observe carefully.

After this, as the day was advancing, we went to the House Island, the largest of all, and the nearest to the mainland. On the western side there are basaltic cliffs eighty feet high, but on the eastward the rocks slope to the sea. It is sixteen acres in extent, and has houses upon it. Antiquarians will recollect that this was a dwelling-place of St. Cuthbert, and there is a very ancient chapel there, which should be inspected. We walked at once to see "the churn" on the edge of the cliff. It is a well-like orifice, connected below with the sea, and, as the waves came dashing in, a dreadful rumbling and roaring is heard below, and then up shoots a volume of water to the

height of eighty feet, to fall with a heavy crash on the rocky edges, and be sucked back again.

We were obliged to leave the cormorants' island unvisited, much to our regret, for the boatman said it would not be safe to go within a hundred yards of it with such a swell on. Our collectors, however, got plenty of eggs, for when we got to Roger-son's we found that some fishermen had made a raid upon the nests, and had a great number of eggs for disposal for a little, or rather a good deal, of beer.

The wind had dropped, and the men had a long row, and it was such a lullaby, the climbing up one side of a steep, smooth wave and sliding down the other, that by the time we had got used to the sensation, three of us fell asleep, to awake when we reached the haven, now bare of water and very slippery. Then we drove back to Bamborough, and our pleasant visit was over.

To land on the Staples it is necessary to procure leave from Archdeacon Thorp, and this is always courteously given. I wish that more restraint were placed on the *collecting* the eggs, although, perhaps, it would be difficult to carry this out. I should like to camp out a week on the Staples, and carefully observe and sketch, and, above all, take photographs of the birds, which might easily be done.



CHAPTER XLI.

Trout at the bottom of a well.

QUADLING was most amused at Peter's novel mode of ear marking a poacher.

"Do you expect to see him again?" he asked.

"Why not? What is he to do without his clothes? It will be very easy to trace a man without coat, waistcoat, or hat."

"I'm not so sure of that. But it won't matter. He will be punished by the loss of his clothes and the licking you gave him. He will mind that as much as a conviction. I don't know how far the law justifies you in stripping him like that, though. You may take his rods and tackle, but nothing else, and the magistrates might be down upon you, and call it highway robbery."

"It wasn't on a highway, anyhow. Besides, he can have his things back if he comes for them. I told him so."

"Well, if you ever see him again I shall be surprised."

So it turned out. The man disappeared, and with him went the cobbler, who, it appeared, had been sold up some time back, and had started on the tramp, but, meeting with the half-bred gipsy, was prevailed upon to go back and do a little poaching.

Prior to burning the confiscated clothes, Peter searched the pockets, finding a pipe and tobacco, and one or two other small articles of no value. In the breast-pocket, however, was a badly-written, ill-spelt letter, evidently from some tramping gipsy, which stated that the trout stream was not carefully preserved,

and was worth netting if Jake saw a chance of netting it, and naming the best deeps for the purpose.

"There, Peter, what do you think of that? About five years ago a gang of men netted the stream, and got clear off, but they shan't do so again. We must look a little stricter after it, particularly if young Mr. Spencer takes to fishing, as Mr. Harvey says he is inclined to do."

So, by way of precaution, the keepers proceeded to place various obstacles in the more unprotected reaches. Broken drain-pipes, small tubs filled with stones and armed with tenter-hooks, sunk in the deeps; stakes driven into the shallows, and other similar devices were employed, and as these precautionary measures got hinted abroad, the knowledge that their nets would be arrested and broken kept any poachers from trying.

Peter took considerable interest in the stream, and did his best to preserve it, shooting and snaring the pike whenever he saw them. Although he had full liberty to fish it himself, he did not think it proper to do so, save when trout were wanted for the Hall, or were likely to be an acceptable present to Mrs. Spencer. Peter used to get a hint when such was the case, and would try early and late to get a brace or two of good fish.

There was one peculiar pond in connection with the river which puzzled Peter in more ways than one. It was perfectly circular, about fifteen yards across, in depth so great that it was currently reported to be unfathomable, and was connected with the stream by a runnel two or three feet wide and partly choked by watercresses. It was, in fact, a natural well out of which a plentiful supply of exceedingly cold water flowed into the stream. In its depths were a few trout of great size and apparent age. Peter often saw them from a little distance swimming in the water clear as air, but directly he approached nearer they would disappear downwards. Peter tried every kind of lure, at all times of the day or night, but without success. One day he saw a beetle struggling on the surface, and presently one of the

great trout rose slowly up and sucked it in. The fish seemed to be fully eight pounds in weight, a veritable giant, and Peter's fingers itched to get it at the end of a line. So he hit upon the following dodge. He built a hedge of reeds on one margin, behind which he could approach it unseen. Over this he propped a very long rod, projecting over the pool, having line and reel ready fixed, but the line led back to the butt. This he left in position for a week, by which time he judged that the trout would have become used to it. Then one day, when the wind was in the right quarter, and the sky was cloudy, with a light breeze rippling the water, Peter, having supplied himself with a few cockroaches in a tin box, cautiously crept up behind the screen and fixed a cockroach on the hook. This he gently pitched over the screen on the water, and allowed it to drift out with the wind, watching the result through a peep-hole. The beetle wriggled about on the surface, and drifted towards the middle. By-and-bye Peter saw the forms of two large fish slowly rising up with a sort of spiral motion. His heart was in his mouth as the largest of them neared the bait, and, after a short pause, sucked it in. Peter jumped to his feet with a shout of triumph and seized his rod, which bent almost double as the line whizzed through the rings. The fish went down, down, down, and the line upon the reel grew less and less. He put on as much strain as he dared to stop the trout in its subterranean journey, but in vain. The line snapped, and Peter was left lamenting.

This was the first and the last time that the trout in this deep well were known to take a bait. Peter tried it often again during the summer, but without success. At last he thought he would plumb the depth. This he found to be twenty-five yards, but as he had forty on his reel, there must have been a lateral passage or extension of the well under the chalk.

Gerard's success in his literary efforts stimulated Peter to try if he could not do something also in the same line. One very

conversazione in the village, in support of a fund to repair the church tower. This was to last two or three days, and was contributed to by most of the parishioners who were able to do anything. The doctor was to read a scientific paper on sea fishes, the curate was going to recite, and Miss Knox determined that Peter should read his paper there. She sent for Peter, and explained her wishes. He expostulated greatly and bashfully, but he was as wax in the hands of this good-looking and artful young lady.

"But it is all about fishing. The people won't care to hear about that."

"Oh, yes, they will, just as much as the doctor's paper. Besides, it isn't what the papers are about, it is the fun of hearing people read them."

"That's all very well, Miss Knox," said Peter, "but it won't be much fun to me to read it. I don't think I can."

"You must, Mr. Penniless. I have shown it to the doctor and the curate, and have promised that it shall be read."

The young lady had wormed Peter's secret out of her brother, and took a very great interest in him, of which Peter was quite unconscious. He liked her very much, however, and was on terms of friendship with her brother, so he did what she asked him.

The entertainment was in the village schoolroom, and, on the eventful evening, Peter went with his manuscript in his pocket. There was a very good attendance; and as Peter ascended a platform for the first time in his life, he felt in the very greatest funk he had ever experienced. His throat and mouth were parched with nervousness, and he felt that he could not say a word, and anathematised the weakness which led him to yield to the persuasion of a pretty woman who was doubtless laughing at him now. The kindly applause which greeted him gave him a little time to recover himself, and then, out of the confused and indistinct mass of faces before him, he saw

Mrs. Spencer's, gazing up at him with undisguised amazement, and not a little amusement, depicted in her countenance. This somewhat nettled him, and gave him courage to begin; and when he had read a few sentences, his self-possession returned.

Although Peter possessed a good suit of "civilian" clothes, yet he had chosen to appear in his best suit of keeper's costume, because he did not wish to appear to be above his position. Miss Knox noted this approvingly, and, indeed, the manly carriage, handsome face, and well modulated voice of the under-keeper, were sufficient to secure him attention and approval. His paper was a long one, and I give only an abridgement of it. When it was finished Peter left the platform, and slipped quietly away, without waiting for any congratulations or thanks.

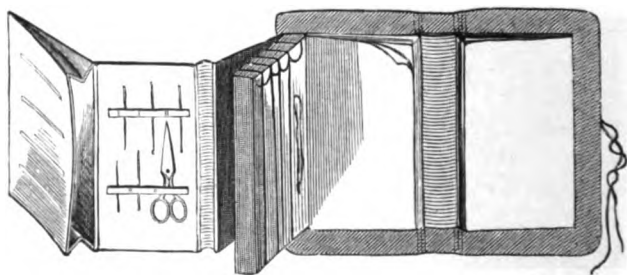
The result of it was embarrassing. Quaddling was not quite pleased, and a suspicion began to cross his mind that Peter was not quite what he represented himself to be. He talked much to his wife about it, but said nothing to Peter; and as Mrs. Quaddling was a zealous friend of Peter's, it made no perceptible difference in their friendly relations. Mrs. Spencer was quite certain that there was something further to be known. She sent for Peter, and put many questions to him, some of which he parried, and to others begged her to excuse him making any reply, and she finally had to let him go without having satisfied her curiosity. She was dissatisfied at this, but interested in Peter, and he began to think that he had done a very silly thing. He went to Knox and unbosomed himself of his vexation with himself; but he only got a little friendly chaff in return. He felt very sore with Miss Knox for having led him on; but he was too polite to let her see his annoyance, therefore he had the uncomfortable knowledge that he had aroused suspicions all round that had better have slept, and he had no one to pitch into but himself.

The next chapter contains such part of his unlucky paper as is likely to interest you, who I hope are, by this time, Peter's friends.

CHAPTER XLII.

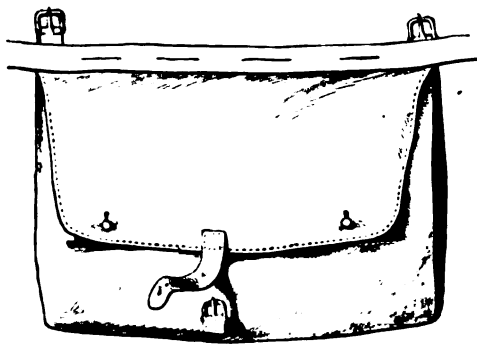
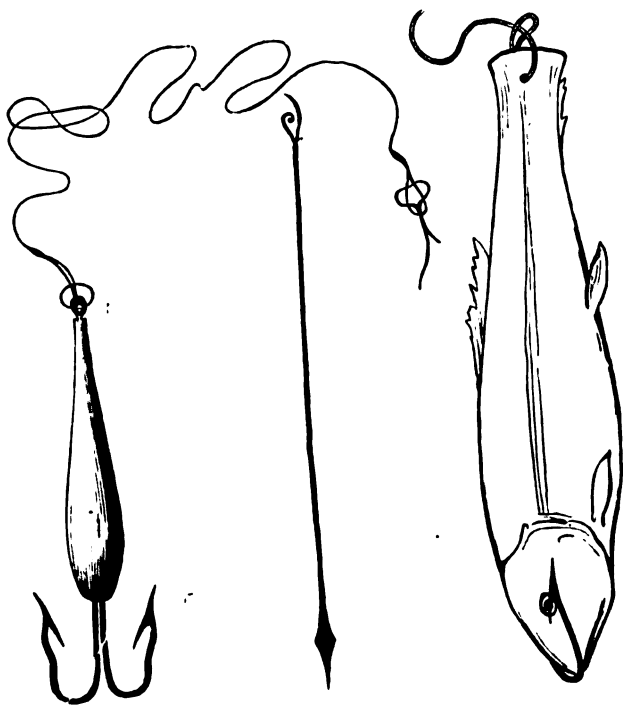
Peter's paper—Angling sundries.

“**M**R. CHAIRMAN AND GENTLEMEN,—I fear that I can add nothing to-night to your store of angling knowledge which is likely to be useful to you, nor am I able to give you a paper of scientific interest. But when anglers meet, they are fond of angling gossip. They fight their battles over again, and even, I am afraid, add to the number of their slain. I, for one, can listen until the night grows old to reminiscences of stream and lake, uttered from the mouth of



ANGLER'S COMPANION.

some veteran angler. There is something in the quiet nature of the sport we revere which awakens the observant nature of the man. Unknown to himself though it may be, yet the active life of Nature, in all her moods, leaves its impress upon

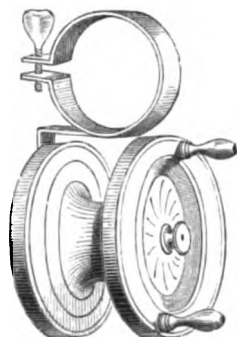


ANGLING SUNDRIES.

him, so that at some future time, when the chord of recollection is touched, the things which he then felt or saw are expressed in a form which never fails to be interesting.

“But as the memory of man is a treacherous thing, which will not work when summoned to do so, but only when it chooses to do so, it is necessary to give it a fillip. If I said to any one of you, ‘Tell me an interesting angling fact,’ he would probably not remember any, but if I told him one, he would say, ‘Ah, that reminds me!’ and forthwith tell you something infinitely better. So I thought that if I strung together at random a few of the angling incidents and pictures which were present in my mind, they would act as reminders to those of you who care for angling, or for natural history.

“I have referred to the quiet nature of the sport, but East Anglian anglers will hardly understand what I mean by quiet and loneliness unless they have fished some moorland stream, where one must be alone in order to fish it successfully. On smaller rivers companions separate on arriving at the waterside. For the variety and excellence of its angling the *Trent* is not to be surpassed, and the Nottingham style of bottom-fishing is far before that of any other locality. They have reduced it to a science of exceeding profundity to the outsider, but simple enough when once mastered. The first distinctive peculiarity of the Nottingham tackle is the reel, which is a simple wooden pin, revolving at the slightest touch. The line which such a reel contains is made of twisted or plaited silk, undressed, and

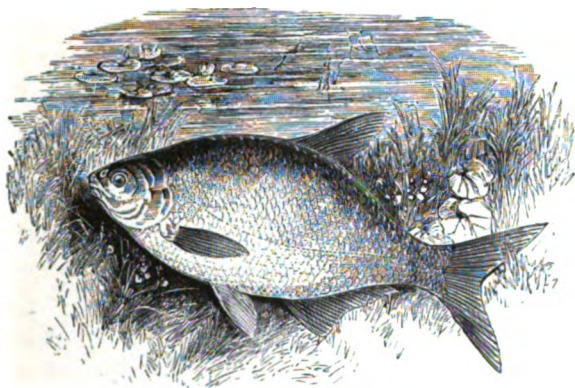


NOTTINGHAM REEL .

of astonishing fineness. For pike-fishing a plaited line of fifty yards in length should not weigh more than three-quarters of an ounce. We tested the strength of such a line the other day ; not a new line, but one well used. It broke at a dead strain of nine pounds. With proper care and a good rod no pike that swims could break it. For roach the line is exasperatingly fine. One hundred yards of it should weigh about two drams and a half. The breaking strength of a used line was, we found, six and a half pounds. The rod has upright rings, and the line is thrown out from the reel. One can easily understand how a long cast may be made with a heavy pike-bait, but it is not so easy to understand how a light roach-float and bait can be cast a considerable distance ; yet it can. It is purely a question of knack. A quick swing, or lurch of the rod, and away goes the bait, the reel being prevented from over-running itself by the little finger being kept lightly touching it. Then, as the Nottingham motto is "fine and far off," the float is allowed to glide down with the stream, taking the gossamer line off the reel as it does so, until a great distance is achieved.

"As some of the holes in the Trent are of great depth, one at Dunham Dubbs being thirty feet deep, it is obvious that it is impossible to fish them with the ordinary float, as if it were set to that depth it would stop the line from being reeled in. Therefore a sliding float is adopted. This is a float made with rings at each end, through which the line freely passes. At the requisite depth on the line a small noose is made ; and a bit of line is doubled two or three times and inserted in the noose, which is then drawn tight. This passes freely through the rings on the rod, but will not pass through the top ring of the float. When the cast is made the float rests against the shot or plummet ; when it reaches the water the float remains on the surface, while the weighted line runs down until it is arrested by the knot. When you strike a fish you have not the weight of the float to lift, and, when you are landing one,

you can reel the line right up, while the float slips down to the plummet. A friend gave this a thorough trial in the thirty-foot hole I have mentioned, one day's sport, consisting of seven stone-weight of carp-bream, weighing from two to five pounds each, not one of which could have been caught with the

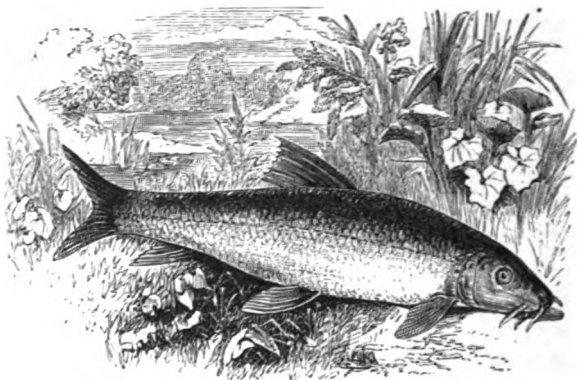


BREAM.

ordinary tackle. Whether the sliding float would be an advantage in these waters, you are better able to judge than I am. I think it might be adapted to pike-fishing with a live bait in deep water. One could throw further if the float, at the moment of casting, was close to the lead. It would only be necessary to have the line to run through the float, and a bit of indiarubber ring, tied on to the line above, would pass through the rings when casting, and keep the float in its place when on the water.

"The barbel is one of the chief sporting fish in the Trent, and grows to a large size. My happy friend had some good sport amongst them. One day the take was twenty-nine, another day twenty-one, and another nine, all large fish, the largest being eight and a half pounds. The place where they were caught

was a pool on the river, across which a large tree had fallen, and under the trunk of this tree the baits were allowed to float, the line rubbing against the tree when the fish were hooked. Once the line caught in the bark and broke above the float, which was afterwards seen bobbing about. Another line was thrown across it; it was hooked and recovered, with a barbel still on the hook. Incidents similar to this occur to every angler. The hooks used by the Nottingham anglers for barbel are also peculiar, in that a loop of silk is whipped on to them, and the gut is



THE BARBEL.

fastened to that loop by another loop. The hook is therefore easily removable, if blunted or bent, without sacrificing the gut. Also, as the silk loop permits free motion of the hook, the gut is not worn out at the head of the shank. The worm is drawn clean over the loops. The hands are dipped in dry sand, to make the handling of the worms easy. By the way, worms must be unusually plentiful in the valley of the Trent; each angler takes with him from one to two thousand worms for bait and groundbait for a day's fishing.

“And now we leave the Trent for districts where coarse fish

are not deemed fish at all, but only enemies to be got rid of in favour of trout and salmon. If the Trent is the scientific home of float-fishing, Northumberland has no superior—perhaps no equal—in the art of trout fishing, while none approach it in the art of trout poaching. The pitmen of Northumberland are a very numerous body of men, and every man is fond of sport. Their dogs are more to many of them than their wives and children. The pitman will keep his Bedlington terrier well fed and daintily clad in a warm jacket, while he himself lives on dry bread and coffee, and his wife and little ones on the charity which dispenses soup tickets, and free breakfasts and dinners. Thousands troop to see rowing matches on the Tyne, or bowling matches on the moor (the bowling consisting of doing a mile or two in the fewest throws of a stone ball), and lose all their money in bets on the events; while the crowd which assembles on the Northumberland Plate day is said to exceed that at Epsom on the Derby day. All these amusements are fatal to the happiness of the pitmen's homes; but there is one innocent amusement which they cannot well make bets upon, and that is angling. They follow this with the same energy which characterises all their sports, and are most of them proficient in the art. Not long ago there was scarcely a preserved stream in Northumberland. Now, my brother tells me, most are preserved. Still, there is much yet accessible to the angler. That queen of trout rivers, the Coquet, is free for many miles in its upper waters, and lower down the best of the water may be fished, upon obtaining a ticket from the Duke of Northumberland's agent, for which, if I remember rightly, no fee is payable, but a trout licence of five shillings has to be obtained. If you happen to drop upon the Coquet trout when they are on the feed, you may fill a large basket with the spotted beauties. At other times you will not stir a fish. They are said to be more capricious than the trout of other streams. No salmon ascend the Coquet, but vast numbers of the bull-trout go up. These

are nearly the average size of salmon, and afford great sport. I remember nearly getting into a scrape on my first introduction to the young of the bull-trout. I was fly-fishing on a splendid Welsh trout and salmon stream, and I was catching many trout, too many samlets, which I had to put back again, and some beautiful, brilliantly-marked little fish, which were clearly not samlets. I came to the conclusion that they were simply better-conditioned trout than usual, and basketed them. I was wading in the middle of a brawling stream, the noise of which drowned all other sounds, and, believing that no person was within miles of me, was talking to myself for company's sake, when I felt the lid of my basket being lifted, and, turning sharply round, I beheld the river watcher. He said :—

“‘You have got some samlets, sir.’

“‘That I haven’t,’ I replied. ‘I have put them all back.’

“‘No, sir; this is a bull-trout smelt, and this, and this. I must take your rod and basket, sir, or I must summon you.’

“It took some time to convince him that I had erred in ignorance, and that neither of the courses he suggested was advisable. He then produced a card of coloured engravings, shewing the difference between the samlet in its many stages, the bull-trout smelt, and the trout. As the only perfectly reliable distinction consisted in the arrangement of the teeth, and I speedily forgot which belonged to which, I had to give the benefit of the doubt to many debateable fish that day. As on some streams in Wales, or the North, you may have to hook and return two dozen smelts for every dozen trout, you will not wonder that the latter do not receive the angler's blessing. When I hear of the fifteen or twenty dozen of trout which old anglers mention as having taken in their youth, I imagine that smelt and parr were taken and counted. Still, I have known twelve dozen genuine trout taken in a day by one rod. Of course most of them are small, but not so small by any means as the roach which I see anglers here pulling out every day I walk

past the upper rivers here, and which are not put back. In the Duke's water, on the Coquet, there is a limit as to size—eight inches, I think,—below which fish must be put back, and on all the rivers the better class of anglers put the undersized fish back.

“Of course the fly is the most general lure, and when there has been a rise on, and I have had a fly similar to that which might be floating by hundreds on the river, I have caught the trout three at a time. One of the most charming methods of fishing, and one of the most successful, is fly-fishing for trout at night. You choose a fine warm night in summer—moonlight must be avoided—and going to a part of the river where there are no trees or bushes to catch your line, you put on one large fly, resembling a moth, and then you cast according to imagination, and fish by feel. The big fish are then on the feed, and in earnest about it. Of course you keep your line tight as it floats down stream, and though you cannot see the rise you can feel the electric twitch, which you answer with a strike. As the gloaming deepens into night, and there is no sound save the murmur of the stream, the cry of the curlew, who does not like your presence on the moor, with occasionally the loud splash of a fish, you feel the loneliness intensely, and, notwithstanding the excitement of landing the fish, you experience a ghostly, creepy sensation, which you afterwards remember as an additional delight. At the time, however, the wheel of a bat past your face startles you greatly; that black form which now slid off that rock, is it a water kelpie or an otter?—and that rustle in the brake, is it a rabbit or a poacher? One gets wound up to a high pitch of excitement on such a night. Even the most prosaic of persons is affected by the experience.

“Night-fishing is the only way of catching the big, shy trout, now that they are so well educated in the ways of defeating anglers. Of course you must frequently pass your line through your hands to see that the fly is still on and the hook unbroken.

If there is a mist on the surface of the water the fish will not rise.

"In the hot summer days the worm is more deadly than the fly, and, indeed, many old and good anglers fish with the worm only all the season through. On hot, bright days, when the water is low and clear, and the fly would be of no avail, the worm fisher is in his glory. His hook is of the finest steel, and his long casting line of the finest drawn gut. He baits with a small red worm well scoured in moss. He has no shot on his line, or only one. He creeps up the stream, and throws the worm as he would cast a fly, into the top of each eddy or stream, and when the bait is checked he waits for the slight quivering of the line, which betokens a bite, and then strikes. Of course he has no float.

"The Stewart tackle is a north-country invention for worm fishing for trout. It consists of three small hooks whipped on to the gut one above the other, back to back, and the worm is hooked on all three. It is deadly enough, but does not come up to the single hook in the estimation of the best worm-fishers, while it catches more easily in any obstruction on the bottom.

"The natural minnow is frequently employed in trout fishing in the north, the artificial minnow but seldom. The drop minnow is that usually used. A large worm-hook has a plummet on its shank, and is drawn through the minnow with a baiting-needle, just like a gorge-hook for pike. The minnow partly takes the curve of the hook, and so twists and spins about when it is worked up and down in the deep, still pools where it is mostly employed. It takes its name from its being dropped into the water, rather than cast or thrown.

"Salmon-roe is a bait constantly used by the pitmen, who facetiously call it marmalade. Its use, fortunately, is illegal.

"It is an extraordinarily fatal bait to trout, and a stream much fished with roe will soon be depopulated. The roe is taken from the salmon, as near the time of spawning as possible.

The berries are sometimes pickled whole, but the general way is to mash them up into a paste, which is cured with sugar and saltpetre. A large lump of this is mixed with cotton wool, and put on the hook. The object of making the use of this bait illegal was to protect the spawning fish. The roe, in its prepared state, is utterly unlike the spawn, as it comes from the fish on the spawning beds, which is the way the trout make its acquaintance ; therefore it must be the odour or taste of the bait which is attractive, and not the form or appearance. Why not, therefore, prepare a paste of the pink flesh of the salmon after it is cooked, cured in the same manner as the roe ? In colour, taste, and smell, it would, I think, be identical with the roe, and would not offend against the principle of the legislature. I should imagine that coarse fish would take this paste freely.

“Burn fishing is largely practised in Wales and the North. Everywhere there are small streams, becks, or burns, which are full of small trout. Shallows, pools, rapids, falls, rapidly succeed each other. The denes or glens, down which these noisy little torrents run, are full of sylvan beauty ; and as you scramble up the bed of the stream, often under a leafy tunnel, as the trees meet overhead, the kingfisher passes you like an arrow shot from a bow, the white-breasted water-ouzel flits before you from rock to rock, and you are brought into the closest and most intimate contact with the abundant life of Nature, nowhere so abundant as by the waterside. You fish with a worm, and go up stream. No stream is too small for the speckled beauties. Little hollows in the rock, the size of a large saucepan, shelter their two or three ounce trout.

“Trout hide under the stones, and in crevices, and in shallow rivers it is an easy thing to bare your arm, insert your hand beneath a stone, and when you feel the cold tail of a trout, slip your fingers along its body until you reach the gills, when you nip it tight, and cast it on the bank. I have known one man take a hundred trout in the day that way out of a preserved

water; and when two or three of them go together for a day's groping, the trout in the water they select will fare badly.

"When the powers of dynamite became generally known, it was much used for destroying fish. It is now illegal to use it for that purpose; but its use was dying out in the North, because of the numerous accidents which resulted. One man was nearly killed in this way. He had thrown a packet into a pool, and was scrambling out of the way up a sloping rock when he slipped and slid back into the water, just as the charge exploded. The rascally practice of putting lime into a brook was formerly common in Wales, and the miners also used to walk up the rivers armed with sledge hammers, with which they would strike any likely-looking stone, and so stun the fish beneath. It is a wonder that any fish at all survive, and fish legislation did not come a minute too soon. The deadliest enemy to the trout, however, is the water from lead mines. Many a splendid stream has been quite depopulated from this cause. The bed of the river, the stones and rocks, are covered by a grey slime, and the water is hurtful not only to the fish, but to the cattle which drink of it, and for many miles below a lead mine the river is poisonous.

"Many trout streams can only be properly fished by wading, and waterproof wading-stockings, coming up to the thighs, form part of every angler's outfit. Wading needs care. One is tempted to go in as deep as one can, in order to reach some likely spot. The water eddying round one's legs, sweeps away the gravel under one's feet, and one slides deeper and deeper in until perhaps, as has often happened to me, the water gets over the tops of the stockings, and fills them. Cases of drowning while wading occur now and then; but the great danger on the Coquet, and many other streams, arises from the quicksands. Here and there you see a smooth bed of gravel and small stones, and if you step on it you sink immediately, and are lucky if you can manage to flounder out. A Cumberland angler lost his life in a quicksand

last year, and most men who frequent these streams can tell you of narrow escapes. I once stepped on to a boulder, which rolled slowly over, and then disappeared in a cloud of mud, as it sank into a quicksand, on the edge of which it was balanced. Luckily, there was plenty of time for me to jump clear.

"You will all doubtless have heard of salmon-leistering—how at night, by the light of torches, men waded up the river and speared the salmon, or drifted down in boats, in the bows of which were torches or fires. This sport is now illegal; but a fair imitation of it is yet occasionally practised in the shape of eel-spearing at night. Even in those stony, rapid streams the eel is astonishingly plentiful, and of large size. It seems to be more easily caught by worm-fishing there than it is in these waters. If you let your worm sink to the bottom of any deep pool, and let it rest a minute, you will catch an eel. As articles of food, however, eels are not esteemed in the North, and no one cares to catch them, save by some such exciting method as leistering. Let me sketch you a picture of an eel-spearing party on a salmon river.

"It is ten o'clock at night. As there is no moon, and the sky is clouded over, it is as dark as it means to be all night; the darker the better for our sport. The river is low and clear, and for a wonder the wind is not in the east. On the rude stone bridge, which is the rendezvous, men are collecting, some armed with spears and some with leisters, the prongs of which are fine and close together, with barbs at the end. There are torches of various degrees of ingenuity in make. One man has a bundle of straw dipped in tar tied to the end of a pickel; others have pieces of well-tarred rope tied together; others bundles of resinous fir. About a score of men of all sorts are collected there, and here comes the keeper, a man of huge stature, and with a voice in which the Northumbrian burr is so pronounced that his speech is like the sound of distant thunder. He gives the signal to begin, and warns all of us to let the trout and the

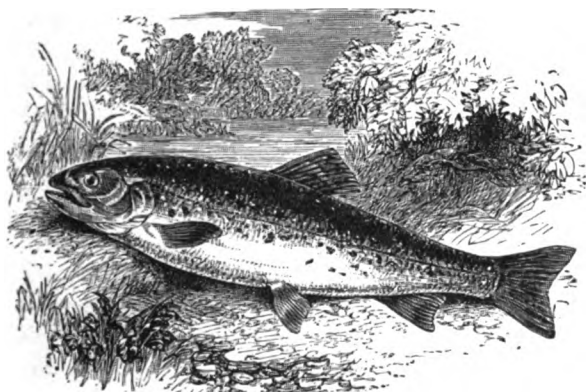
salmon alone. The whisky-flasks are passed round, matches are struck and the torches lighted, and then the men form in line across the river, torch-bearers alternating with spear-bearers. Overhead the startled lapwings utter their plaintive cries; on the hillside the curlew's note is loud, ghostly herons rise annoyed from the shallow bays, where they fancied themselves safe from intrusion, and the otters hurry back to their hovers or strike off inland as we approach. When your eyes become used to the light, you find that every pebble at the bottom is plainly visible, but it takes some little time to see the fish. By-and-bye, however, you see them distinctly. Trout, parr, and salmon allow you to almost tread on them, so puzzled or fascinated do they seem to be by the light. Instead of at once darting to the shelter of a stone, they remain until you could touch them. Now it is that you see what large fish there are in the river. You may look and long as much as you like, but you must not touch them. Now you see an eel, and raising your spear, you make a dive at him. You have missed, for you did not allow for the refraction of the water. You must aim nearer to you than the fish appears to be, or you will strike beyond it. Now the fun grows fast and furious. Misses are more frequent than hits, but nevertheless many eels, big and little, are transfixed and transferred to the bags carried by some of the men. Now and then someone measures his length in the water, and a torch is quenched with a fizz. Another man disappears in a deep hole, and is somewhat roughly dragged out. The rocks and trees cast fantastic shadows, and outside the circle of torchlight the darkness seems intense.

“Viewed from the hillside the scene on the river is wild and savage in the extreme. But mountain streams run cold even in the height of summer; whisky flasks are not self-supplying; torches burn out, and so, after two or three hours, the noisy crew leave their sport and strike homeward across the moor well laden with eels, and the river settles down to its wonted quiet. The

heron and the otter return to their haunts, the lapwings cease their wailing, and the curlew returns to its frightened young ones, crouching amid the ling.

“Reverting again to my much-beloved trout, there are still more ways of fishing for him than I have time to enumerate. I will ask your attention, however, while I describe one or two.

“Dapping, or dipping, with the natural fly is often successful, particularly the improvement upon it known as floss-silk-line



TROUT.

fishing, or blow-line fishing. You fasten a line of the lightest floss-silk obtainable, consistent with the necessary strength, to your reel-line. Your hook is small and fine in the wire, and is tied on the finest drawn gut. Your rod should be long and pliant. Your bait is some natural fly—Mayfly for choice. Thus armed, you go to the windward side of the river or lake, and let your gossamer line float out on the breeze, so that the fly just keeps touching the water in front of you. A slight lift of the rod-top will lift the fly off the water, and set it on its travels again. In

x—2

lake-fishing from a boat this is a very deadly way. You watch where a trout is rising, and let the fly touch just above him. In the Mayfly season the cream of the sport may be had in this way. In East Anglia the advent of the Mayfly is unnoticed and uncared for, but in trout-fishing districts men watch eagerly during May and June for its appearance, for they know that the trout are watching for it even more eagerly, and that when the luscious flies go floating down the river, all the trout go mad with a desire to eat them. A trout stream with the Mayfly on is a sight to see.

“In the South of England, the trout are much larger, much shyer, and much less numerous than they are in the North. These great fat southern trout are wonderfully well worth catching. They know a thing or two, however, and it is very difficult to catch them. Often have I watched very large ones in the lanes between the weeds of some Hampshire stream. As each fly or other object floats down the stream, they rise leisurely and inspect it, and if satisfied of its harmlessness, they suck it in. As a general rule, the ordinary method of fly-fishing with wet flies, is of no avail. A dry fly must be used. Only one is put on the cast, and after each throw, it is whisked to and fro through the air to dry it, so that when it falls on the water it floats dry and upright. A rising fish is duly ‘spotted,’ and the angler sets himself to outwit it, creeping on hands and knees through the lush meadow grass, and casting as if his life depended on the cast.

“Of fishing for the Thames trout—that rarest of fish—I have no practical experience; but men spin day after day and month after month, with an extraordinary patience, and without success, or much apparent hope of it.

“The most deadly contrivance of all, both for salmon and trout fishing, is one which is happily now illegal. I refer to the lath or otter. This consists of a board about three feet long, three inches wide, and half an inch thick, jointed in the middle, so as

to fold, for convenience of stowing. One edge of this is weighted with lead or iron, so that it will just float on edge in the water. A strong line is fastened to this lath by means of a bridle, rigged like that on a kite, and a strong stick or rod, with a large reel for the line, is used to tow the lath. The latter sheers out, as you walk or row along, to any distance. At intervals along the line, shorter lines with flies attached are suspended, and these comb the water. I have seen the same plan used for pike on some of the Cumberland tarns; and most deadly it was. Instead of flies, artificial baits were suspended from the line. Another dodge I have seen the miners use in Cumberland, is to tie lines and spinning baits to rude toy boats, and set them to sail across the lake.

“The most successful baits I have ever used for pike were goldfish. I once knew a pool fed with warm water from certain factories. The goldfish literally swarmed in this pool, and were of all sizes up to two pounds in weight. A dozen fish were put in a few years ago, and had increased to such a marvellous extent that once lately, when water too hot had been allowed to flow in and some of the fish were scalded to death, a barrow-load was taken away without making any perceptible difference in their number. The owner used to fish for them with a cormorant. It was a pretty sight to see the pool on a fine day. The surface was quite golden with the fish, so thickly were they grouped together. As you drew near, however, they sank down out of sight. We used to catch a few with a casting-net, but most with roach tackle and paste for bait. They played vigorously, and gave a good deal of sport. Most of them were too large for bait, and out of a score of fish only five or six would be small enough. However badly the pike were on the feed they would not refuse live goldfish, and I have used them successfully when the water has been thick with mud, during a spate. It would be well worth the while of two or three ardent pike-fishers to unite together and get a barrel-full of goldfish

brought over and consigned to some small pool for stowage during the winter season.

“The next most killing bait for pike, as far as my experience has gone, is the eel-tail bait. About nine inches of the tail end of an eel is cut off, then the skin is drawn back for four inches and sewn down, the exposed flesh being cut away, and the skin secured by a string tied round at the point which forms the head. The bait is all the better for being kept in salt, which gives the turned-back skin a bluish tint. It may be used with any kind of spinning-tackle, and is so tough that one bait will last all day.”



CHAPTER XLIII.

By the sea—A smuggling dodge—The capture of the smugglers.

PETER was so busy with his inland avocations that he saw but little of the sea. An occasional walk on the shore by the warren, and a stroll on the pier on Sunday afternoons was as much as he had time to give to it. The love of salt water and of adventurous sailing which at present distinguishes Peter Longley in his more prosperous circumstances had not as yet been awakened in Peter Penniless. Save for the short paddle in company with the gipsy poacher on the night of the warren adventure he had not been afloat on the sea since his arrival at Wetacre. On warm Sunday afternoons, however, he used to be very fond of going for an hour or two to a projection of the rough old pier and sit and read, or dream of the future. It was his one weekly holiday hour which he devoted to self-examination and contemplation, the latter, indeed, often deepening into a snooze.

One afternoon he was thus taking his ease, and occasionally scanning some distant vessel through his invaluable glasses. The atmosphere was singularly clear, rain being not far off, and the sea was calm and gently heaving, its blue-green surface barely rippled by a light southerly wind. A French lugger was coming up the coast from the southward, about a mile out, and Peter idly brought his glasses to bear upon her. Every part of her deck was clearly visible to him, and he amused himself by trying

to identify and name the different articles that crowded her untidy decks. Along the further or starboard side he noticed a number of round objects which he took to be net-buoys, but following her with his glass as she passed, he noticed a couple of the men open a sort of gangway in the bulwarks, and let the apparent buoys slip overboard. The lugger went on her course without stopping for a moment, and the round objects were no longer on her deck. While Peter was wondering what this could mean, he heard voices just above and behind him. He was invisible to the speakers, because he was in a recess of the pier where the planks had been washed away. One of the voices said :

"What the blank did the blank fools do that for in broad daylight? They might as well have waited until night-time, and not run so much blank risk."

"There is no risk, mate. The coastguard are asleep now, but they are on the watch at night, that's why I always say that it isn't well for us to go out after the goods at night, because there is no excuse for going out. One can't sweep anchors at night, or trawl, while in the day-time who is to know whether we are hauling our net in, or something else? We can't get that string in except in two or three journeys, so we had better begin tomorrow."

"All right. I suppose we shall get a letter in the morning giving us the marks."

Peter listened to all this and more with the greatest interest. It was clear that a little smuggling was going on, and he desired to participate in the fun of finding it out. When he presently heard the footsteps moving away, he carefully peeped over the edge of the pier, and as he expected, recognised one of the men as the occupier of the suspicious cottage up the river. Bearing in mind what they had said about marks, he looked again to seaward. The lugger was just opposite a distant ship when she dropped the kegs or bales, and the ship was still apparently in

the same place on the horizon. So Peter made a rough sketch on an envelope of the bearings from the pier, and the probable distance, and then walked off to consult the coastguard. In old times a good deal of smuggling had been done at Wetacre, and a coastguard station had been established there. But for many years there had apparently been no smuggling whatever, for the trade of the port had so decayed that few vessels frequented it, and the opportunities of landing contraband goods were not many. The coastguard men had an easy berth of it, as coastguard men seem to have in most places nowadays. Shrimping, sole-trawling, and anchor-sweeping were the ordinary and not exciting occupations of the seafaring population of Wetacre in the summer. In the autumn and winter most of the men went off to the herring fishing from Yarmouth and Lowestoft, and a considerable amount of piloting was done by two families of pilots who kept a smart pilot cutter at anchor in the bay in all weathers. If a gale came on so as to make the anchorage unsafe, these brave pilots would board their craft and sail her out to sea until the gale abated. Their draught of water was too great to allow them to use the harbour, as they could only cross the bar at the top of high water, and a pilot cutter must be ready to be off at a moment's notice.

Smuggling is such a venial offence in the eyes of a sailor that the pilots or any other seamen would never discover it even if they had to shut their eyes to avoid doing so. And if the anchor-sweepers or sole-trawlers saw a suspicious buoy-line, they would pass by looking on the other side. It will be necessary, perhaps, to explain what is meant by anchor-sweeping. Great numbers of ships used to anchor in the bay and along that portion of the coast, there being good anchorage with offshore winds. But if a gale sprung up suddenly, vessels would sometimes break from their anchors or abandon them in a hurry, and if this was suspected by the shoremen, they would go and drag for these anchors and get them up. Or if a small trawler got entangled

in one, she would buoy the spot, and afterwards come with proper appliances and raise it. The Admiralty allowed a certain small sum per hundredweight for every anchor recovered. A portion of the denes at Wetacre was covered with hundreds of such anchors of all sizes and degrees of rustiness which had been swept up and placed there until somebody should think it was time to do something with them. Very curious and picturesque they looked, and artists who wanted one for a foreground study would often come and sketch some of them.

When the two men had gone out of sight Peter strolled up to the coastguard station. Here he found the Doctor smoking a pipe with the two men. They listened to his story, and the coastguardsmen seemed to be rather incredulous. The doctor said, however,

"I know Penniless too well to suppose that he would easily be led into a mistake. I think he has got on the scent of a bit of real smuggling, such as you haven't found out for years. I strongly recommend you to try and nail the fellows."

"So we will; but they are watching us, you may depend, and if either of us goes out in a boat to look about they won't go out. Now, if this little game is really going on, we want to catch them at it," said one of the men.

"Aye," replied his mate, "but if we catch them hauling the thing into their boat they will say that they got foul of them with their trawl and know nothing about them."

"That's true. Now, what I could make bold to ask is that the Doctor and Mr. Penniless should help us. If the Doctor would take his little boat and trawl out, and watch them from a distance with a glass, then he could signal to us, and we could meet them when they get up to the old cottage up the river and search them."

"Agreed," said the Doctor, "if Penniless will come."

"Oh, yes, I'll come!" replied Peter, eager for the fun.

So the next morning early, the Doctor and Peter stepped into

a little beach-boat and started to sail out with the ebb tide. As they did so, the suspected smugglers' boat was also dropping down the river, laden with her trawling-gear.

"Morning!" shouted the Doctor, "Whereabouts had we better go to get a few soles?"

"Go where you like, and be ——" was the uncivil answer. "What do the likes of you want interfering with the poor fishermen, and catching the soles, out of which he gets a living?"

The Doctor laughed and Peter said to him, *sotto voce*, "We'll interfere a little more with their honest way of getting a living before we've done with them."

It was a fresh and lovely morning, with a calm sea and a soft, south-west wind; what one of the old fishermen called "silky" weather. They sailed away to the southward, followed by the other boat. After going about a mile, the smugglers shot their trawl, and after sailing about half a mile further, and a little further seaward, the Doctor shot his trawl also. He had a small trawl of the kind known as an otter trawl, which is the most convenient kind for a small yacht or boat, inasmuch as it dispenses with the cumbersome beam. The trawl-net is a large net which is dragged along the bottom, sweeping up whatever may be in its course. Ordinarily the net is kept extended by a beam as long as the boat which carries it, but in the otter trawl there are only two boards, so weighted and attached to the net and the rope from the boat that they sheer out from each other, on the principle of the kite or the "lath" as often used in trout-poaching. As the trawl is towed along, the boards sheer apart and so keep the mouth of the net extended, while a heavy rope sweeps along the ground.

When the trawl was out they half lowered the lug sail so as to reduce the speed of the boat to suit the trawl. The two boats were thus drifting along with tide and wind; the Doctor's being a little on the starboard hand of the other. After drifting for about an hour the Doctor hauled up his trawl, in

which were several *soles* and a quantity of shrimps. The trawl was shot again and the drifting recommenced. The smugglers had not raised their trawl, but were now drifting close by the spot where Peter judged the contraband goods had been sunk. He lay down on the bows with his glass resting on the gunwale, and kept their proceedings in view as well as the motion of the boat would permit.

"They are now beginning to haul the trawl. There! they now have it alongside of the boat! Now they have got hold of another line! Hooray! this is getting exciting! They are hauling the kegs in under the cover of the net! What deep beggars they are! Now they are getting their trawl in!"

"Shall we give the signal to the coastguard?"

"Yes; we may as well."

So the doctor sent a little burgee up to the masthead, and let it remain there, which was the preconcerted signal.

The trawling went on for another hour, and then the smugglers lifted their trawl, and sailed for the harbour as the flood began to make. The doctor and Peter followed their example, and sailed in after them.

"Now, Peter, what shall we do? land at the quay, or sail up after those fellows, and see the fun?"

"I should prefer the latter, but you may not like to be mixed up in the affair."

"Oh, I don't care a rap. They are not patients of mine, and if they were, they would never pay me."

So they sailed on up the river in the wake of the smugglers, who seemed uncomfortably surprised and suspicious.

"Look at the fellows looking back at us, Peter. Keep an eye upon them, so that they do not chuck the kegs overboard."

They were overtaking the first boat, and, when they neared the old cottage, were not fifty yards behind. The smugglers ran their boat into a little creek by the cottage, and the doctor and Peter beached theirs also within a few yards. This pro-

duced some abusive enquiries as to what they meant by such conduct. The reply was given by the two coastguardsmen and a policeman, who made their appearance from behind a wood-pile, and proceeded to board the boat.

"This blessed game's up, Bill!" said one of the men to the other.

"Aye; and it's that long-legged keeper as has spotted us, I'll swear. I'll be even with him yet, though."

"Will you, my friend?" said Peter. "Then if either of you wish to try, just step in front of me now."

But the men declined the challenge, and, in the face of such a superior force, made no resistance while their boat was being searched. Underneath their net and tackle were found six kegs of brandy, and a search of the house revealed a cellar pretty well stored with spirits and tobacco, and also a good many rabbit-skins and snares, which showed that the men did a little land-poaching as well as sea-poaching. The only other inhabitant of the cottage was an old woman, hideous enough to be a witch. She was the mother of the two men, and, while they were sullen and reticent, she was voluble with curses and objurgations.

The men were removed in custody, and Peter and the coastguardsman rowed out to sea, and, after a little search, discovered a lot of wood like driftwood floating on the surface. To this was tied a cord, and to the cord was tied a rope, and when this was hauled in, there came with it six other kegs, and twelve small bundles of tobacco, securely fastened up in waterproof material.

The smugglers were in due time convicted and sent to prison, and the excitement of the affair died away.

CHAPTER XLIV.

Trout-fishing in a reservoir—An article from Gerard.

HERE are some further doings of Gerard's:—
The town of Newcastle-upon-Tyne is supplied with water from a series of large reservoirs on the high ground on the north bank of the Tyne, about nine miles from Newcastle. These reservoirs hold large numbers of trout, of fabulous size, and wily beyond belief. Again and again you may go and try with minnow, worm, and fly, and succeed in catching only a few running up to a quarter of a pound, while you will have seen monsters of four and five pounds swimming about.

There are, if I recollect rightly, six reservoirs—two of them so large that they deserve the name of lakes, and the others of a good size. The largest is said to hold the largest fish, but the smaller ones are more profitable to the angler. They receive and store the water from a beautiful trout stream, which in its course down to the Tyne below the lakes, through leafy dells, and rocky ways, forms the most fascinating streams and pools. It is too near, however, to Prudhoe Collieries to hold many fish, for the pitmen are inveterate poachers. You see a man strolling harmlessly along with his hands in his pockets, but, when you are out of sight he gropes under the stones, and takes up the trout with wonderful ease. Once while fishing a burn, a

"Geordie" came to look on, and presently he handed me a trout, all alive and kicking. "Hac's one for ye, sir."

"How did you get it?"

"Oh, aw joost picked it oop i' the watter."

"I suppose you often pick them up in the water?"

"Whiles."

I have known a couple of pitmen go up the Devil's Water for a day's groping, and take twelve dozen trout in that way. They are also very fond of using salmon-roe for bait, and if one is discovered having "marmalade" in his possession and fined, his mates subscribe and pay the fine.

The reservoirs can only be fished by leave of the secretary of the company, which is given to respectable persons upon application. The pitman is, fortunately, only a rare visitor there; but when he does go, he catches the large ones.

The first time I visited the reservoirs, we went by train to Prudhoe Station, the line running by the side of the Tyne all the way. We crossed the river by means of a ferry, and saw a pitman catch a fine trout with a minnow just below; while a little further down a salmon leaped twice out of the water. We followed the course of the burn upwards, and a charming walk it is, through characteristic Northumbrian scenery. When at intervals we emerged from the leafy, rocky "dene" down which the stream dashed, the valley of the Tyne lay spread out beneath us. To the westward the gleaming stretches of river lost themselves in the swelling hills; to the eastward the clear stream grew turbid with the tide, and disappeared beneath the smoke of Newcastle. On the opposite hill were the picturesque ruins of Prudhoe Castle, and to the northward was the long hill, from the labour of which the green shadows and glancing lights of the stream-cleft dell lured us too often. After a while we came to the conduit which leads the water to Newcastle. Here is a bright open stream or canal, and as we walk along it we can see numbers of fine trout, some certainly over two pounds in weight.

However deftly you might cast a fly or a worm within a few inches of their noses, they could not be caught, but darted full speed for the shelter of an arch or culvert.

The lower reservoir is much the largest, and its further shore was quite indistinct in the misty distance. After a few casts without a rise, one grew rather disheartened at the monotony of flogging so great an expanse, and sought one of the smaller reservoirs higher up. Here plenty of fine trout were visible, but none would rise near the margin. The only touches we had all the day were both singular. My friend was trailing his flies along the water as he changed his station, and he hooked a large trout within a few yards of himself in perfectly clear water. It, however, broke away. The other was an even bolder fish. In despair I put a good-sized float on my line, and, with a worm on the hook, I fished where a rush of water from a feed-pipe or sluice created a strong current, and took the bait well out into the pond. While drawing the line in, a trout of about two pounds and a half rushed at the float and seized it. I pulled it away and threw the worm in, but as soon as the float touched the water the trout had it again, and I gave him a smart pull. This was within a yard of the side, and the fish came from under the sluice. He was a beautifully-coloured fish, and wise enough not to come a third time.

A smart breeze sprang up for an hour or so, and we fished in the ripples, but avoided the white surf in the leeward corner, where it seemed impossible to cast. Presently, however, a fisherman made his appearance, and going straight to this corner he cast a short line into the teeth of the strong wind, and caught trout very fast indeed, hooking them within six inches of the stones. It was in a sharp angle of the steep stone embankment, and, although we edged as near to him on each side as decency permitted, we could not share his fortune. As soon as the breeze lulled he stopped fishing, and we entered into conversation with him, and he showed us his fish, which included one of

two pounds and a half, one of two pounds, one of a pound and a half, a dozen of half a pound and under. He told us that it was no use fishing there except in the rough water on the leeward side, where the fish followed the drifting flies, and that he should fish no more unless the wind got up again, or unless he had an artificial minnow. The natural ones were of little use, as there were too many of them; but with an artificial one he had caught many large fish, running up to four pounds. His flies were large black hackles roughly tied, and large red or black hackles or spiders were the most killing flies. Some of his trout were long, silvery, and salmon-like, others as ruddy and spotted as possible. The difference in the two varieties was very clearly marked.

"Ye will get na mair troot the night. They are supping on the black gnats," said he; and verily the water was a sight to see. Little fellows rose with noisy splashes, and monsters quietly touched the surface with their noses as they rose, and with their tails as they turned to descend. We walked round and round the ponds, casting right over the fish, which scorned even to inspect our flies; and, with the exception of half a dozen quarter-pounders, we came empty out of the midst of plenty. Surely, we thought, night fishing would repay us here; and so one hot summer's afternoon we walked along the road which runs along the Roman Wall. Up and down hill it goes straight, taking the crests of the hills rather than skirting them, and forming a very tiring road to walk or drive along. We stopped at the village on the hill, just above the reservoirs, where there is a comfortable inn, and where we engaged a double-bedded room. When we reached the water-side we found it rippled by a gentle breeze, and I quickly secured a dozen nice little fish, the largest being three-quarters of a pound. Then it fell quite calm, and we waited until it grew dusk; the warmth, however, seemed to vanish as the sun went down. Very few insects came out in the gloaming; no fish

even rose to our cunning white moths ; and presently away came a breeze from the east, and a cold "sea fret," or mist, wrapped everything in obscurity, and rendered it dangerous to walk along the steep and slippery stone embankments. The fish would not rise, and our night's fishing was destined to be a failure, and when a curlew came screaming at us from unexpected quarters, and sending cold showers down our backs, we thought it time to trot back to the inn. That night my companion aggravated me dreadfully. I could not go to sleep in the heavy-curtained four-poster, on a too soft feather bed ; but he, in the other bed, was sound asleep in an extraordinary attitude. He had kicked the clothes off, and lay on his back across the bed, with his head hanging over the side in a manner that would have settled me for good ; yet he looked so confoundedly serenely asleep, that I shied a pillow at him. He simply moved a little, with an insane chuckle, and slept on, while I had to get out after my pillow.



CHAPTER XLV.

Gate-netting for hares.—Hiding in a cow-skin.—Trapping a poacher.

AS the two keepers were one day walking along a boundary fence of a field adjoining the high road, which fence was a low wall of earth and stones, with a wire fence on the top, Peter noticed a turnip lying against one of the meuses. A "meuse" is a hole in a fence or wall purposely left to give the hares ingress to and egress from a field where there are no gaps in the hedge. The turnip had no business there, so Peter kicked it away, noticing nothing unusual, and supposing it had rolled there by accident. Quadling, however, regarded it with suspicion.

"That looks as if it had been placed there on purpose," he said. "Let us look at some of the other meuses." They did so, and found at one a stone, at another a piece of wood, and so on, until all the meuses in the wall, four or five in number, for there was a good length of it, were found blocked in this way.

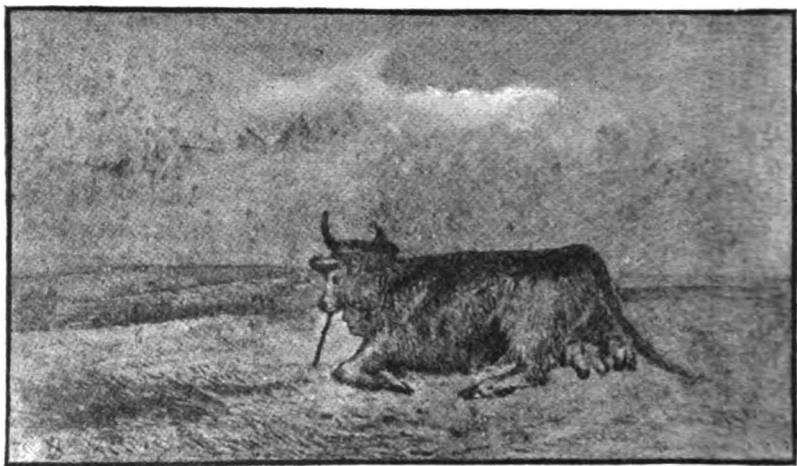
"There's somebody going to try a gate-net to-night, Peter. We shall have to watch. This is the gate they will no doubt try. Where can we hide?"

"I don't know; there isn't a place about where a dog could hide, to say nothing of a man. If they come here they will have a clear field before them. It's a pity we can't get the cows in the field to watch."

"The very thing!" exclaimed Quadling, slapping his thigh.

"What's the very thing, sir? You can't get the cows to watch."

"Can't we?" chuckled the keeper. If you don't mind a little dirty work we can. What do you think of this dodge? The men won't come until it is dark, so we have plenty of time. Let us go to the butcher's and borrow a cow's hide, head and all. I know he has one, because he killed yesterday. We could bring it here, stuff it out a little with straw, and get



A FRAUDULENT COW.

under it ourselves. In the dark they will take it for a cow lying down."

"Capital!" laughed Peter; "but suppose somebody sees us getting it ready?"

"We must get it ready at home, and carry it here by the fields at dusk."

The butcher lent them a hide with pleasure, and shewed them where they might make a couple of peepholes in it

without spoiling it. It tickled the keepers amazingly as they stuffed the legs and neck with straw, and at nightfall they carried it to the field, carefully avoiding being seen by anyone. They placed the skin about twenty yards from the gate, with the back to the gate. They propped the head up with a stick, so that the horns might be visible, and then huddled under the skin. It was not a savoury position, and it was very hot and steaming, and Peter felt that he ran a good chance of being sick if the poachers did not soon arrive. The elder keeper had no qualms, and was happy enough in his queer position.

While they are waiting in hiding it may be well to explain what gate-netting means. When hares frequent a field they become well acquainted with the position of the gate as well as of the different hedge-gaps or meuses. If there is a wall or bank with meuses through it, they generally use these meuses, but the slightest thing makes them suspicious of traps at them. Therefore it is quite sufficient to place anything strange in front of a meuse to prevent a hare using it. The timid creature sees danger in everything new, and a turnip placed where no turnip was before has as much terror as a trap, and is as effectual a block to that passage as if it were covered with sods. Then gaps in hedges generally demand a little leaping or pushing through, which takes time, and a hare, if closely pursued by a dog, will be afraid to pause for the time necessary to effectually take the gap, and will make for the gate. If the bars of the latter are not sufficiently high or wide apart for her to take it easily, there is generally a gap by the side of the gatepost, between it and the hedge, which is more easily forced than a hedge gap. The poachers know the habits of the hare only too well. They go at night, accompanied by a lurcher dog specially trained. They are provided with a net, which they stretch loosely across the gateway and its adjacent gap. The net is so placed that when a hare strikes it, it falls down and entangles her. The men, or one of them, is in waiting, and at once kills

tie hare and resets the net. The lurcher goes into the field and starts the hares, taking the most intelligent care to force them away from the hedge, where there may be easy gaps, and to drive them towards the gate.

The keepers presently heard heavy footsteps approaching



GATE-NET.

them. This turned out to be a cow, who was curious to make the acquaintance of the strange beast lying there. When Peter put out his head the cow turned and galloped off as if old Nick were after her.

"I say, Mr. Quadling; suppose the poacher's dog scents us, and comes up, what shall we do?"

"Shoot it. That's why I brought my gun. The men may be too quick for us, but I thought we might have a shot at the dog. Hush! Do you hear anything?"

Peter listened instantly, and looked through his peephole in the direction of the gate. It was too dark to make out anything, but he thought he heard some slight sound at the gate. The next thing was the pattering of a dog over the grass, and past them into the field. Then in five minutes there was the



LURCHER.

sharp scamper of a hare, and the noise of a scuffle at the gate as the net fell upon him, and the men there reset it.

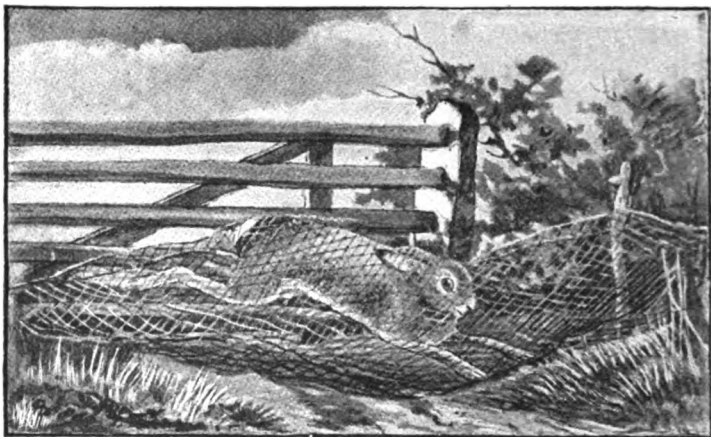
"Shall we make a bolt at them?" whispered Peter.

"No, wait a bit; the clouds are breaking, and in five minutes the stars will give us light enough to see them by."

So it proved. There was a brisk wind blowing in the upper regions, although it was still enough below, and in a few minutes a large portion of the sky had cleared, and the forms of two men were distinctly visible at the gate. At the same time the

cow became visible to the men; and the keepers distinctly heard one of the men say to the other, "Go and kick that old cow up. She is right in the way of the hares coming to the gate. There ought to be a dozen hares in this field."

One of the men approached the supposed cow, and lifted his foot to kick her up. In an instant Quadling had grabbed him by the leg, and the fellow was so awfully frightened that he gave vent to a roar like a bull, which came to a sudden stop as

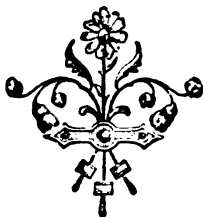


HARE IN GATE-NET.

Quadling jerked him over on to his back, and got hold of him by the throat. Peter had, in the meantime, jumped up and rushed to the gate, but there he was nonplussed, as he could not tell which way the other fellow had gone. He listened, and heard no sounds of footsteps, so he returned to assist Quadling with his capture. He was an undersized little chap, a stranger to Wetacre, and terribly frightened at the scrape he found himself in. According to his own account he was on the tramp, and had met a poaching chap who had persuaded him to help him

in this night's job. He said it was the first time he had ever been poaching, and made many whining excuses, which might or might not have been true.

Peter was for giving him a sound caning and letting him go, but Quadling liked to get convictions, as they were examples to others, as well as, no doubt, a proof of his own diligence. So the little chap was marched off and afterwards convicted; the narration of the mode of capture causing much amusement among the magistrates. The man refused to give any information as to his comrade, who therefore escaped scot-free, but the net was confiscated. It was a very light, but strong, silk net, so nicely made of green silk thread, that Peter cut it in two lengths and utilised it as curtains for his bed-room window, arranging its folds in an artistic way



CHAPTER XLVI.

Peter's daily work—His aspirations—A warning from Susie.

FOR the next two years Peter's life rolled on uneventfully. For some time after his indiscreet performance at the village *conversazione*, there was a slight friction or awkwardness between him and Quadling; but Peter was so zealous in the discharge of his duties, so ready to fulfil and anticipate every wish of his chief, and so willing to undertake the hardest and dirtiest work that it might be necessary for him to do, and so useful in sparing Quadling trouble, that the latter was put at his ease again, and had no diffidence in ordering Peter about as freely as if he were his own son. The old keeper had the truest instincts of a gentleman. Once the idea dawned upon him that Peter had a secret—it took hold of him, and became to him a fact; yet he so respected Peter's wish to keep this secret, that he made not the slightest attempt to inquire into it, and when he occasionally corresponded with his old friend Wilson, he never alluded to it, or evinced any wish to become acquainted with it. In this respect he was not imitated by his wife, who, good soul, had a burning desire to know all about Peter's antecedents, and every now and then invented a fresh story respecting him. In her mind he became everything, from a gentleman farmer's son to a prince in disguise; but as Peter only laughed at her hints, and went so far as to be displeased and cross with her for bothering him, she was constrained to let him alone.

Peter was so gentle and pleasant a fellow that his crossness upon these occasions made far more impression upon her than the displeasure of an habitually cross person would.

Peter enjoyed his daily round of occupation much on the whole, and was growing a model of health and strength—one of the finest specimens of young men to be found in the country side. But he felt at times, and more frequently as the time went on, impatient and anxious to exercise his powers in a more extended sphere. While, three years before, his physical organisation was much in advance of his mental organisation, now the balance had, by dint of steady training and a strong determination, been struck. His mind and understanding had come nearly up to the level of his physique; while in body he was far above the average, in mind he was fully of the average, and in all branches of knowledge and science, appertaining to the management of land, he was theoretically well informed. No wonder, then, that he began to chafe at his narrow bounds, and to look on all sides for an escape. In the castles in the air which he sometimes built, he mapped out his future career in this wise. He would leave Wetaere, and spend a month or two in idleness to let his hands lose something of their roughness and his face and neck something of its tan. Then he would offer himself as a pupil to a land agent at a nominal salary, or without one for a year, and then hope to be worth a salary. He saved every penny he could, and, having found out that he could write decent English, he had written several articles for the agricultural portion of the *Field* and other papers on scientific agriculture, for which he had got a good many pounds. His store now amounted to forty-eight pounds and some odd shillings in a savings' bank, and when he had made or saved seventy-five pounds, he thought he might risk the year's effort without return, which he anticipated.

Gerard had obtained a good berth as under-master in a northern grammar school, and there was no fear but that his

success in life was assured; and he had developed some scientific tastes which had procured him, in addition, a professorship in a local scientific college. He had been many times to see Peter, and Peter had been once to see him, and they corresponded regularly once a week. Their letters were always long and full of discussions upon some scientific subject of interest to both; and Peter lived in two worlds—the rude physical healthy world of his keeperhood, and the fine intellectual world of communion with his brother and with books. For friends Peter had, besides his kind master, Quadling, Mr. Knox, and the doctor. Harvey came over at intervals, and, when he came, treated Peter more as a companion than as a servant, for which Peter was grateful. Young Spencer he saw astonishingly little of. Save for occasional fishing excursions, Spencer took no delight in outdoor pursuits, and Peter often wished that Harvey had been Mrs. Spencer's son.

For acquaintances he had every person in the village. He was civil to everyone, and no one presumed on his good nature, for on two or three occasions when this had been done, he had made the offenders feel the weight of his strong arm. Although there might be many among the sturdy men of the village who might be as strong as this youthful son of Anak, there were none who had his skill and science—the skill which had been the chief result of his school education.

The watchers and workmen on the estate, to whom he had occasion to give orders, obeyed him with a readiness which they did not always accord to the head keeper. Peter never stormed or swore, but he had an effective way of dealing with a refractory subordinate. On one occasion Quadling sent him with a message to a watcher lately employed. The man was a little drunk, and very surly, and refused to take orders from a young chap like Peter. So the latter got hold of the man by the scruff of his neck and the baggy part of his breeches, and marched him, *volens volens*, right through the village to the keeper's

cottage, to take orders from the head keeper himself. The man's struggles were of no avail when Peter once had a firm grip of him, and he finally concluded that obedience was not only necessary but proper, and, after making an abject apology to Peter, he was allowed to go off to do the job. This had a very salutary effect upon others, but the doctor told Peter that he was a little too fond of resorting to physical force, and that it might get him into trouble some day.

"It is no laughing matter, lad," he said, kindly. "I admit that there is a great temptation to use those long and strong limbs of yours to solve a difficulty without the trouble of argument, and also that it was kinder to collar that watcher than to get him dismissed; but you have no right to take the law into your own hands. You may get excited some day; and as you don't really know how strong you are, you may do a man an irreparable mischief, and get put into quod. So take care, Peter."

And Peter promised to take care, but did not see any danger of his ever losing his temper, as he had never lost it yet.

The decoy had been fairly prosperous, and there had been a remarkable freedom from poaching. The head of game was larger than it had been for years, particularly the pheasants, which was almost a pity, seeing that the shooting days were few and far between, compared with other estates less peculiarly situated as regards ownership.

A somewhat cold and inclement summer was drawing towards autumn; and one evening Peter, having finished his work, sat in his little bed-room, putting the finishing touches to a very good article on ensilage, which he had been preparing, advocating the use of this method, then very little known, of harvesting hay in wet seasons. Mr. Knox and Peter had constructed a small "silo" (as the pen in which the damp grass is stowed is called) on Knox's farm, and he had been writing of the result of this experiment. Peter's writing, by the way, was rather peculiar. His natural hand was large, to say the least of it, and extremely

dashing or sprawling, and a little of it went a very long way, at the rate of two huge words to a line. But he had trained himself to write a sort of printing hand, square and regular, which was very neat and legible, though as artificial as type itself. He finished copying his rough, sprawling draft in this neat printing hand, tied up and folded his manuscript, and then, as it was getting late, undressed and got into bed. But he could not go to sleep, which was a very unusual thing with him. His mind was full of wonderings—castle-building, and such like; and through all ran a peculiar feeling of nervousness, as if something were about to happen. It might almost be called a presentiment, except that it pointed in no particular direction, and was merely a vague feeling of uneasiness, for which he could not account. He tossed restlessly about, and at last determined to count steadily on until he fell asleep,—an old dodge for producing slumber, which personally has never had any effect upon me.

He had steadily counted up to two hundred and fifty, when he was startled by something rattling against his window—evidently stones, thrown by some one below. He jumped up and opened it, and saw a figure below, indistinct in the darkness.

“Is that Gentleman Peter?” a voice asked, using the nickname by which he was known in the village.

“Yes; who is it? What do you want?”

“I am Susie Saunders. Let me in. I have something very important to tell you.”

“All right. Wait a bit;” and Peter hastily struck a light, threw on his clothes, and going downstairs, let Susie in.

“Why, what is the matter, Susie?”

She was shaking from head to foot with nervousness.

“Oh, Mr. Penniless, there is poaching on! and murder if they are interfered with!”

“Good gracious! Sit down, and tell me all about it.”

“There’s those two men whom you caught smuggling, Vince and the big gipsy, and a lot of others sworn to harry the woods

by daylight. They are now talking it over and quarrelling. There were eighteen of them, as far as I can make out, had fixed to beat the woods for pheasants, and shoot anyone who interferes with them. Some of them are navvies from the new line at Crostwich; and that lot have fallen out with the Wetacre and Crostwich lot, and I think they are going to divide, and each gang work on its own account."

"How did you hear of all this, Susie?"

"I daren't tell you, Mr. Peter, because I don't want to get others into a scrape. But the men met to-night at a house I know, and I hid myself beneath the open window and heard them. They quarrelled about the share they were to have; and the navvy lot, who are the biggest, said they would beat the best cover of the decoy, and that if the others came near them, they would give it them hot."

"Well, I hope their di agreement will come to a fight, and that they will spoil each others' game. But it is serious news, Susie; and we are short-handed. One of our watchers is ill, and the other has gone over-night to Crostwich with the two keepers on the next estate on a poaching case there, so there is really no one except Mr. Quadling and myself."

"Yes, they know all that; and you must not go near them, for there are some gaol-birds among them, who would as soon shoot you as look at you. I came to warn you not to go near them. Please don't, Mr. Peter, or you will get hurt."

"It's really very kind of you, Susie. I assure you I am very grateful. I must tell Quadling, and see what he advises."

"You will never tell anyone save him that I came to you, will you? or they will murder me."

"You need have no fear on that score, Susie. I wish I could do something for you. It is not a nice life for you to lead, consorting with poachers and rogues."

"I wish you could, Mr. Peter; but I doubt it is too late. Good-night, and promise me to take care of yourself;" and poor Susie slipped quietly away into the darkness.

CHAPTER XLVII.

The shaping of Peter's fate—Knox's friendship—News comes that Peter has been shot.

THE agent who managed Mrs. Spencer's estate, in common with others, lived at Crostwich, and was one of those men who will do everything personally, and not trust anything to their assistants; so, when he died, there was no one in his office who was competent to fill his place, not even his son, a young man of five-and-twenty. He had been so sternly suppressed and kept subordinate by his father that he was not able to assume any responsibility, or to take proper charge of the affairs of the office. The clients were not long in finding this out, and Mrs. Spencer, among others, had such cause for dissatisfaction that she decided upon transferring the care of her estate to other hands. In this emergency she sent for Mr. Knox, who now held two of her largest farms, and one under another landlord, having prospered very much at a time when many other farmers found times hard, crops unproductive, and stock-feeding unprofitable. The secret of this was mainly that Knox had, during a series of years when farming was profitable, saved money rather than spent it. He had not launched into useless expenditure, nor aped the appearance and ways of country gentlemen, like so many of his fellows, so that when inclement seasons made farming less profitable, he had the capital to work with which his fellows lacked, and prospered accordingly.

One morning, when he came in to breakfast, he found a note awaiting him from Mrs. Spencer, asking him to be good enough to give her an interview at the Hall.

"Now, Kitty," he said to his sister, "here is something to think about. I know very well what Mrs. Spencer wants me to do. She gave me a hint the other day."

"What is it, Frank?"

"Why, she wishes me to take the agency of her estate."

"Oh, you have so much work to do already with the three farms. You will undertake too much."

"So I think, too; but I wish to oblige Mrs. Spencer. If we could only get the berth for Penniless! He is quite fit to be an agent."

"That would be nice. I am sure if Mrs. Spencer knew all about him she would appoint him."

"I don't know. It is a big jump from gamekeeper to land-agent, and he is still very young. The tenants may not like it altogether."

"Oh, I am sure they will. If Mr. Penniless were dressed like a gentleman, he would make a very splendid gentleman and people would like to deal with him."

"I do believe you would rather Penniless got the post than I," said Knox, laughing.

"Yes, I would. You don't want it unless you give up the farms and go and live at Crostwich, and take other agencies too. Then I should not mind."

"I won't leave the farm, and I don't like putting a bailiff in charge. I shall not make any money in that way. However I will go and see Mrs. Spencer."

As Knox walked across the Park he heard the sound of guns in the wood, and was rather surprised that there should be any rabbit-shooting without his being asked to join. But was it rabbit-shooting? He had half a mind to go and see, but, deeming Mrs. Spencer's summons more imperative, he went up to the

Hall, and was shown into the library, where Mrs. Spencer joined him.

"Good morning, Mr. Knox. What is that sound of firing? are they rabbit-shooting?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Spencer; I heard the guns, but do not know what it means."

"Well, I suppose it is all right. What I wished to see you about, is this. I want an estate agent to manage my estate. Will you accept the appointment?"

"I am much obliged to you for the offer, Mrs. Spencer; and if you will not accept a better man, whom I am about to propose, I will do so."

"A better man, Mr. Knox? That can hardly be; but I will consider what you have to say."

Mr. Knox was smitten with some nervousness, but he said, "You will be rather astonished, I fear; but the man I mean is Mr. Peter Penniless."

"What, my under-gamekeeper?" exclaimed Mrs. Spencer, gazing at Knox, in surprise.

"Yes, he is thoroughly fit for it, and is thoroughly trustworthy."

"You very much astonish me, Mr. Knox; but I know you well enough to be sure that you would not make the suggestion lightly. What education has he had to fit him for such a post?"

"He had a good education when he was a schoolboy, and since then he has been a most diligent student of everything relating to farming and to land management; and few estate agents are possessed of so much general information as he is."

"Then he must be a prodigy, for how could he find time to study? Quadling says he is a most hard-working gamekeeper, and he will, in time, make an admirable head-keeper. It seems preposterous to remove him from a post for which he is so well fitted, and to place him in one which he has had no experience."

"Peter would do his duty, and give satisfaction in any post in which he might be placed, Mrs. Spencer."

"He is evidently a friend and *protégé* of yours, Mr. Knox. Pray tell me all about him."

As Mr. Knox hesitated, and did not know what to say, Mrs. Spencer continued,

"Now I think of it, I had a talk with Penniless about two years ago, and it struck me then that he was either a very superior kind of person for his class, or that there was some secret about him. I don't like secrets. Do you know anything about him?"

"I can guarantee his capability and honesty, Mrs. Spencer," replied Knox, evasively.

"That is no answer to my question, Mr. Knox, and I am sure I have a right to be curious. Pray tell me all you know about him."

"I cannot tell you all without his permission, Mrs. Spencer. He told me his history as a secret."

"You are quite right to respect his confidence; but it is a secret he should tell me also, particularly if I complied with your request to make him my agent."

"May I put it this way, Mrs. Spencer? If I get him to tell you what I know, and if I satisfy you as to his capability, and be myself surety for his honesty, will you give him the post?"

"I won't quite promise you that, but I certainly will favourably consider it. Whatever is the matter outside? Will you please open the glass door, and ask?"

Knox did so. The reply was dreadful in its import.

"There has been a terrible fight with poachers, and Mr Penniless is killed."

Knox saw that Mrs. Spencer had heard; and, without waiting to pick up his hat, he tore off at the top of his speed in the direction of the woods.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

The poachers' raid—A misty morning—The poachers' quarrel—A desperate encounter—A terrible tragedy.

DEAR, dear, that is a bad job!" said Quadling, when Peter had acquainted him with what had transpired. "I've often heard of a group of poachers going in broad daylight and poaching by force, but it has never happened to me yet, and I thought we were too quiet here for any such thing. It is those navvies, they will stick at nothing when they are in for mischief, and even you, Peter, would stand no chance with two or three navvies."

Peter knitted his brows and set his lips tight, with such an ominous look that Quadling was alarmed.

"Peter, lad, don't look like that. It would be madness for you to attack any one of them. I think Susie is right, you had better keep away altogether."

The young man controlled the feeling of savage excitement which had suddenly come over him, and had frightened him by its force. For a moment he felt in his veins the strength of Samson and in his mind a Berserk fury, but he calmly answered:

"I will do anything you think right, Mr. Quadling, except stay away. We must surely go and try to recognise some of them, although it would not be prudent to endeavour to prevent them."

"The recognising won't be so easy, lad. They will have

masks on, I expect. If we go we must neither take sticks nor guns. If they attack us we must run, for we can do no good, and may suffer much harm."

Peter made a grimace, and again felt the desire of combat surging in his veins. Quadling looked at him with some apprehension and said: "Now, you understand that there is to be no fighting. If we can hide ourselves so much the better, but we must keep out of the way of their guns. I hope you don't think I'm a coward in giving this advice."

"No, Mr. Quadling, no! I really believe that it is only out of care for me that you do so."

"Well, there may be something of that. You have no father to pull the rein, and you are in my charge."

The keepers spent a very uncomfortable night. They relit the kitchen fire, and sat up over it, talking and waiting for the dawn, and nervously listening for every sound.

When the morning broke there was a thick and heavy mist; so thick was it that they hoped it would have the effect of stopping the projected raid. At first you could not see ten yards through it, and every leaf and twig was covered with globules of wet. As the early morning came on without any sound to break the heavy stillness, the keepers began to breathe more freely, and presently sat down to, and ate a good breakfast.

Mrs. Quadling bustled about waiting on them, and earnestly exhorting them to stay indoors if the poachers came, and not risk their lives. Her husband was too old to be killed, and Peter was too young; and the latter could not help asking her, with a smile, what was the proper age for a man to be killed.

Just then, a single distant shot broke the stillness. The keepers jumped to their feet, and rushed out of the cottage into the thick mist. Again a shot sounded to the eastward, followed by another to the westward.

"Hark! was that an echo?" said Peter.

"I don't think so ; I never noticed any echo in these woods. There it is again from both quarters."

Two shots sounded, one on either hand, east and west, apparently at opposite extremities of the wood.

"Either they have commenced to beat the wood at both ends, so as to make short work of it, Peter, or the gang has quarrelled and separated, as Susie said they would do, and are working each party on its own hook."

"Then if they meet, as they must do, I hope they will fall out among themselves, and make a fight of it."

"Aye ! I recollect when I was a young man we had information that our coverts were to be poached, and we made up a large party to meet them, and laid in wait. But two parties of poachers came unbeknown to each other, and when they met, each side thought the other were the keepers, and they had a most bloody fight. When they had exhausted themselves the keepers stepped in and collared pretty nearly the lot. But I am afraid we shall have no such luck this time."

"They are not firing often."

"No, the mist is against them. I wonder they can see anything at all to shoot at ; and do you notice how dead the reports are ? The sound is killed by the mist. It is a lucky thing for our pheasants that this sea-fret has come on. Hang that railway and the chaps that work there ! That's the cause of all this mischief. But we had better hide ourselves. Where shall we go, Peter ?"

"The wood-stack is just in the centre of the wood. We can easily hide ourselves in that, but I should like to wait and judge where the two parties will meet, and see the fun."

"Very well, we will do so, but mind you don't try to join in the fun, as you call it. It would be no good tackling that gang with less than a dozen men, and although I might have got volunteers to make up half a dozen, perhaps, that would only have been a temptation to go at 'em, and the end might be disastrous."

"I think the law ought to allow us to shoot the rogues."

"The law will find what they call 'extenuating circumstances' if the rascals shoot us, but if we shoot them it's murder. They are getting close, Peter—moving fast and shooting but little. If they are rival gangs they will be in a pretty temper when they meet. Let us get into that wood-pile."

There was a quantity of faggots and brushwood stacked in a glade, and it was easy for the two keepers to worm their way into these and conceal themselves, so that they could not be seen from outside, while, through their peepholes, they could command a view of the glade, which here ran right across the wood. Here they remained and talked in whispers, unconscious of the fact that another human creature was hidden in the same pile, not three yards from them, a trembling creature, daring scarcely to breathe for fear of discovery.

The fog or sea-fret lay thick and heavy, saturating everything with its moisture, and pressing heavily on the eyelids, as if it were a sensible weight or oppression. The wet ran down the brown branches of the hurdles in the pile, and dripped from the trees with a loud patter. As the poachers approached, the bewildered game began to move across the glade in opposite directions, and to run and fly hither and thither in confusion, the sound of their flight being audible, but they themselves being rarely visible.

"A more unlucky day for poaching could not have been chosen," chuckled Quadling. "They haven't fired a score of shots between them all the time, when, if it had been fine, they might have fired a hundred."

"Wouldn't it have been well to have had all the dogs out?"

"They would only have been shot, poor creatures. No, Peter, don't fidget. Force is of no avail. You must just be patient. Hush! They are close by now."

In a few minutes more the shooting ceased, but, on both

sides, there was the sound of men pushing rapidly forward through the brushwood.

"Listen to that!" whispered Quadling. "They are eager to meet."

Two or three men burst into the glade and halted, just as an equal number came in from the other side. Those coming from the eastward were the navvies, those coming from the westward were the local poachers and gipsies. This much could be made out, but the forms of the men loomed so large and indistinctly through the fog that none of them could be distinguished further, so as to render identification possible.

There was a short parley, which for oaths and general profanity was so bad that it made the listeners shudder. Shorn of this attribute, the effect of the conversation was simple.

"What are you doing here, spoiling sport, after we warned you not to come?"

"We didn't make the fog. Besides, we have as much right to be here as you have."

"If you don't clear out we'll make you."

"Just try it on, then."

Then there was the sound of a blow, and two gigantic shadows closed in a tussle. The first comers on each side had been augmented, and, as far as could be judged by the sounds, there were at least a dozen men on each side. The first blow was the signal for a general fight, which was, however, conducted with fists. The sticks and guns, which would have been used against the common enemy—keepers, were thrown down, and the fight waged fairly enough. The details of it are, however, so sickening that it is unnecessary to dilate further on this portion of the affair. The navvies, as the bigger and stronger men, had the best of it, and, though severely mauled themselves, overcame their opponents, and remained masters of the situation.

Gathering themselves together, they held a consultation as to what was best to be done. Some of them were for giving up

and going home ; others averred that the fog was lifting, and that in a short time it would be clear enough to go on shooting, with some chance of success. The discussion upon this point became heated, the bolder ones who wished to go on with the job in hand, taunting the others with being cowards. The two keepers listened anxiously to the discussion, which was carried on within a few yards of them, the gang having moved up towards their place of concealment. The men had all worn masks of black crape or cloth tied over their faces as a disguise and protection against recognition, but in the scuffle with their quondam allies, many of these had become displaced or were torn off, and the keepers scanned the exposed faces as the men drew near, and mentally noted all they could for future recognition.

At last, the man who appeared to be the ringleader, a short, burly navvy, with a powerful frame, said, with an oath,

"I shall sit on one of these here hurdles until the fog lifts, and those who like can go home."

So saying, he took hold of one of the bundles of wood behind which the keepers were hid, and as he overthrew it to make a seat, he exposed them. Starting back, with an ejaculation of surprise, he seized a stick which lay on the ground, and, as the keepers stepped out, all unarmed as they were, he rushed at Peter, who was the foremost. Before the blow could descend Peter had closed with him, and, having the advantage of much greater height, he gripped him in the only way in which his superiority, in that respect, would neutralise the greater physical strength and weight of the navvy. He thrust the elbow of his left arm underneath the chin of his opponent, with the hand bent over the man's left shoulder, and there grasping his coat. Pressing forward with all his might, and grasping his adversary to him with his right arm, he gave him a grip, which, if the proper hold can first be obtained, is a most effective one, and even deadly in the hands of a fairly strong man. The navvy's head bent slowly backward, and having this advantage, Peter

ventured on a backheel trip, and the fellow went down on his back with a tremendous thud, with Peter's arm and weight still on his neck. There was a slight crack audible, and the thought flashed through Peter's mind, "I have broken his neck and killed him," and the horror of the thought was so great, that, as he staggered to his feet, he put his hands to his eyes as if to hide the sight. Quadling was engaged endeavouring to parry the attack of two or three poachers, and another man brought his gun-stock down on Peter's head with a force sufficient to kill him, if it had not been for Peter's uplifted arm, which broke the blow, and was itself broken by it. Peter fell on to his knees, and then the brute, seeing that he was not quite disabled, raised his gun to his shoulder and fired at him. But he did not hit him; for, with a shriek that rang through the woods, a woman burst from her hiding-place in the stack, and threw herself between the muzzle of the gun and Peter, and received the whole of the discharge in her breast. It was Susie Saunders, and the dead body of the poor creature fell across Peter, who, overcome by this new horror, and greatly stunned by the blow he had received, became unconscious.

The affray ceased at this terrible occurrence, and the poachers turned and fled, leaving their senseless comrade; poor Peter and Susie lying on the wet grass, and the head-keeper kneeling by Peter's side almost out of his senses with grief.



CHAPTER XLIX.

Peter's illness and recovery.

WHEN Knox arrived, breathless with his run, he found the doctor kneeling by Peter, who was partly conscious, but with his mind so confused, that he was talking utter nonsense, like a delirious or insane man. Susie, lay where she had fallen, covered with the doctor's cloak. She was quite dead, and his attention had to be given to the living. The poacher had recovered consciousness, and was being led away by the policeman. Two or three cottagers were there, and Mrs. Quadling had Peter's head on her lap, and was trying to soothe his excited ravings. While Knox was greatly relieved at finding that Peter was alive, yet he was greatly shocked at the tragedy of which poor Susie was the victim; and Quadling was crying like a child. Matters were in this state when Mrs. Spencer and the men-servants from the Hall arrived, bringing what help they could.

"Oh, doctor!" cried Mrs. Spencer, "I am so glad you are here; and I hope it is not so bad as has been reported."

"It is bad enough, Mrs. Spencer," replied he gravely. "Peter is seriously hurt; but his life was saved by this poor creature, who gave her own for his;" and he just lifted a corner of his cloak to show the young face, comely even in death.

Mrs. Spencer was inexpressibly grieved, and stooping down, she imprinted a kiss upon the pale forehead.

"Was she his sweetheart?" she asked.

"No, ma'am," replied Quadling, "he never took any notice of her; but she was main fond of him. She warned him of this attack, and begged him to keep out of harm's way; and I did my best too."

"And is Penniless much hurt?"

"He has had a nasty blow on the head, and a broken arm; but its the sight of this poor girl lying dead, and for him, that has turned his mind, I doubt," said the keeper.

"I suppose he can be moved, doctor?"

"Oh, yes; we can soon extemporise a litter."

"Then if you will do so, and carry him up to the Hall, I shall be greatly obliged."

"Oh, I wish to nurse him, if you please, ma'am!" cried Mrs. Quadling.

"So you can; but he will have more comfort at the Hall, and you may come and stay there, by all means. It will be very good of you."

"It will be better that he should go to the Hall, Mrs. Quadling," said the doctor, "and I fear that he will need all the care and attention that can be given to him for some time."

"Then if you will carry him up at once, and attend to him, doctor," said Mrs. Spencer, who was a woman of great presence of mind, composure, and energy, "I will see to this poor creature, and I will see that she is decently buried. Has Penniless any relatives to whom we should telegraph?"

"Yes, ma'am, a half-brother, Mr. Gerard Longley, who lives in the North. He writes to Peter every week, and there's a letter which came just after they left, which I think comes from him," replied Mr. Quadling.

"Then we will open it sufficiently to get the address, and then I will send a messenger to Crostwich to telegraph to him."

The next night a cab from Crostwich drew up at the Hall, and Mr. Gerard Longley was announced. Mrs. Spencer went

into the great hall to meet him. Before her she saw a handsome young fellow, who, perturbed and travel-stained as he was, looked every inch a gentleman, and without much surprise on her own part she found herself warmly shaking hands with him.

"How is my poor brother, Mrs. Spencer?" he asked.

"His arm has been properly set, and there is no other serious wound from the blow. The doctor says that he does not apprehend any serious hurt from the blow on the head, but I am sorry to say that his mind has for the present deserted him, probably owing to the shock of the death of the poor girl who saved his life. But you have not heard the story."

"Yes, I have. The driver told me everything as we came along, and also that you had sent for another doctor, from Crostwich, to confer with your own. It is very, very kind of you. May I see my brother now?"

Mrs. Spencer led him to the sick-room, where Peter lay in bed. He lay quite still, but kept on talking in a low tone, with his eyes fixed on the ceiling. Mrs. Quadling was seated by his bedside, bathing his forehead with ice-cold water.

Gerard went up to him and kissed him. He took hold of his hand, crying, "Peter, my brother, don't you know me?" but Peter made no sign of recognition, and went on muttering to himself.

"What does he say?" Gerard asked of Mrs. Quadling.

"We can't make out, sir. He speaks so thick and low."

Mrs. Spencer persuaded Gerard to take some refreshment after his long journey, and after this he sat by his brother's side, holding his hand and endeavouring to catch the gist of what he was saying. It seemed to be the same each time, a repetition of one phrase; and as the night wore on and the stillness was deep, while Mrs. Quadling had gone to lay down for a time, Gerard began to think that the muttering had a distinctive sound. This grew upon him, and at last he felt certain that the constantly repeated phrase was,

"I broke his neck. I have killed him."

This was a mystery to Gerard ; but when he mentioned it in the morning to the doctor and Quadling, who called together, they told him of the struggle with the poacher whom Peter had overthrown.

"Depend upon it, he think's he has killed the poacher," said the doctor, "and that is what is preying upon his mind."

"I doubt if he saw Susie at all, or knew that she was shot," observed Quadling. "His back was turned to her, and he was already stunned by the blow."

"We must impress upon his mind that he did not kill the man," said the doctor ; "but I don't see how we can do it."

"I will do it," said Gerard, resolutely ; and, bending over Peter, he replied to each repetition of the phrase, "*I broke his neck ; I have killed him,*" "*No, you did not ; he is alive.*"

Hour after hour did Gerard repeat this denial, with the same regularity as the sufferer's self-accusation. When he had to leave for necessary refreshment, he made Mrs. Quadling, or the nurse, who took his place, go on repeating the denial.

It was a touching scene, and Mrs. Spencer, ordinarily a very self-composed and even frigid woman, had several good cries over it.

At last, on the fourth day, Peter's self-accusing moans ceased, and his eyes turned from their fixed stare at the ceiling, and rested for the first time upon the face of his brother. Gerard went on with greater emphasis than ever—"No, you did not : he is alive."

Presently Peter gave a long sigh, and faintly said, "*I did not : he is alive.*"

"Yes, he is alive—he is alive."

Peter gave another great sigh, turned his head sideways on the pillow, and fell fast asleep, while Gerard fell on his knees and thanked the good Lord for His mercy.

Creeping noiselessly out of the room, he met Mrs. Quadling in the passage. He cautioned her not to go into the room, but to watch at the open door, and then went down to speak to Mrs. Spencer. With her he found Harvey, who, hearing of the affair, had come over from Cambridge to see how Peter was getting on. He was much delighted at the good news, and went off at once to the doctor to inform him.

Peter slept all that night and late into the next morning. When he awoke he knew Gerard, and said to him, "I have had an awful dream, Jerry, but I can't tell it yet. What is the matter with me?"

"You have met with an accident, old man, and you must keep quiet. The doctor won't allow any talking."

Peter shut his eyes again, and lay and rested. The doctor had now arrived, and pronounced that all the fever had gone. Mrs. Spencer brought Harvey into the room for a minute, and when Peter saw him he said, "How d'ye do? I know your face, but can't recollect your name."

"My name is Harvey."

"Were you at Eton?"

"No, Penniless," replied Harvey, with a significant glance at his aunt.

"My name is Longley, not Penniless," said Peter, rather tartly. "Why am I not in my own room? I don't recollect this. And this lady?"

"Hush; no more talking," said the doctor. "Leave the room, all of you, except Gerard."

Presently Gerard left Mr. Quadling in charge, and rejoined Mrs. Spencer and Harvey.

"I think, Mrs. Spencer, you are entitled to know all about my brother and myself," said Gerard, and he told the whole of their history to the sympathetic ears of Mrs. Spencer and Harvey.

"It was a foolish freak of Peter's to change his name, par-

ticularly as I didn't; but the idea took his fancy, and nothing would turn him."

"When your brother has quite recovered you shall be the first to tell him that I have appointed him as the agent of this estate; and let me tell you you have both gained the esteem which I do not lightly confer or withdraw."



CHAPTER L.

Peter's recovery—The attainment of his desires—The explanation of the mystery.

ONCE started on the road to recovery, Peter's progress was rapid, and his memory as rapidly returned to him.

Susie's death was kept a secret from him as long as possible, for fear of the shock causing a relapse ; but one day, he was sitting in an armchair in a conservatory, enjoying the green warmth and vivid colours of the flowers with Miss Bellamy and her younger sister, who had just arrived on a visit, sitting near, and talking to him, when he suddenly said,

"It has just flashed across me that after that fellow hit me I heard a shot. Was anyone hurt?"

There was a dead silence, and Gerard, who was at the far end of the greenhouse fumigating a plant with his cigarette, threw it down, and joined the others.

"Was anyone hurt? Why don't you answer?" said Peter to him rather impatiently.

"Yes, old man, some one was hurt; but we'll defer telling you that until you have heard another bit of news which will give you pleasure. We know the desire of your heart is to be a land steward, and that is what you have been striving and working for. Well, your great friend, Mr. Knox, spoke to Mrs. Spencer about you, and she promised that if the wonderful mystery you took refuge in were satisfactorily cleared up, she would give you

her agency. Permit me to welcome the 'gentleman redivivus,'" replied Gerard. He had kept this announcement purposely in reserve in order to counteract the shock which he feared the news of Susie's death would inflict. Peter's face flushed, and he could scarcely control his joy at this more than realisation of his fondest hopes. But he was even then not forgetful of others, and said,

"I am very thankful, Gerard, and I will go at once to Mrs. Spencer, and make my acknowledgements. But who was the person injured? Was it one of the poachers?"

"No, dear old fellow," said Gerard, sitting down by Peter's side, and taking his hand. "It was poor Susie Saunders. She was hidden in the wood pile as well as you keepers, and when the murderous villain raised his gun to fire at you, she rushed in between and caught the shot intended for you, and she was killed."

Peter rose to his feet with a sharp cry of surprised horror, which he could not suppress, for his chivalrous soul was bitterly shocked and grieved at the idea of a woman having suffered for him. Then he looked down at the lovely and sympathetic faces of the two young ladies, and then, taking Gerard's arm, he walked away to his own room.

On this painful episode I do not wish to dilate further. Susie's grave was the first spot Peter visited when he went out, and he took care that it was afterwards marked by a suitable monument.

The proceedings against and the punishment of the poachers may also be passed over, just mentioning that the poacher who shot poor Susie was tried for murder, and was found guilty; but a British jury recommended him to mercy, on the ground of *provocation*. A petition was got up by sentimental folk opposed to the game laws; the Home Secretary gave way to their appeal, and so the ruffian, who deserved not only death, but torture, escaped the capital punishment of hanging, and was instead sent to penal servitude for life. In all, twelve of the poachers were

identified, and received various punishments, and the tragedy which attended this attempt at forcible poaching was sufficient to deter any further attempt being made while the navvies were employed on the line.

When the two brothers had left the conservatory, Miss Ethel Bellamy said to her elder sister,

"Why should this girl have sacrificed herself for Mr. Longley?"

"How should I know, my dear? He is a very handsome fellow, and I suppose she liked him."

"Do you think he encouraged her?"

"No," answered Miss Bellamy, emphatically; "that I am sure he did not. I don't think he has the remotest idea of flirting, and he would consider it dishonourable to flirt with a girl beneath him."

"But while he was a keeper she wasn't so very much beneath him, was she?"

"Not outwardly, perhaps; but to his inner self he was a gentleman, and she was not a lady. If you, my dear, look at Master Peter with those big eyes of yours often, I shall be much mistaken if you don't teach him the way to flirt."

"How can you say such things, Mary?" replied Ethel, blushing. "If Mr. Longley thinks flirting wrong, I am sure I do."

Oh, dear, my publishers are very cruel men! Here is such a nice little love story to be told, and they will not let me tell it because, they say, boys don't care for love stories. Then boys must have changed since I was young, that's all. The budding and blossoming of this very pretty love affair must therefore remain untold, save in the most direct and matter-of-fact way. Mary and Ethel Bellamy were the orphan daughters of an old friend of Mrs. Spencer's, and were very poor, so that the elder came to be companion to Mrs. Spencer. Her sister visited her there, and met a tall, handsome young man, who was recovering from an illness. He was, therefore, a fit object for pity. He was the hero of a mystery, which young ladies

like. Peter fell in love with Ethel; Ethel fell in love with Peter. Peter proposed to Ethel, and Ethel accepted Peter. All their friends approved of the engagement. There were no difficulties in the way. It was simply necessary to wait until Peter had made a little money to buy furniture, and had got a home to go to. With a handsome salary from Mrs. Spencer, Peter felt justified in setting up an office in Crostwich. He at once secured another large agency, and much of the business which had been transacted in the late agent's office found its way to him. His story was bruited about all over the county, and had the effect of making him known, and favourably known too. To be favourably known is half the battle of life; to show oneself worthy of this favourable notice is the other half, and this Peter was physically and mentally, socially, and in a business way able to do. He had Ethel to work for, and this gave him untiring energy, so that Peter laid the foundation of prosperity.

But we must go back to our old friend Quadling. He took the news of Peter's elevation very philosophically. He said:

"I always thought he was not one of the common sort. I suppose he will forget us now, though. Never mind; it is the way of the world."

"You never saw so much in him as I did, Quadling," cried his wife; "and as to his forgetting us, that he will never do. If ever I saw a true man, he is one."

There was a knock at the door, and in walked Peter and Ethel. Quadling rose to his feet, and instinctively touched his hat to the *debonnair* young gentleman before him.

"Don't do that, my old friend," cried Peter, grasping the keeper's right hand with one hand, and laying the other on his collar, and giving him a hearty shake; "you have been a true friend and father to me, and in my heart and home you shall be an honoured guest, so no more touching hats. As for you, Mrs. Quadling—well, I don't know what to say. You have been a

mother to me ;” and Peter put his arm round the old lady’s waist, and kissed her.

As the young people were leaving, Ethel said to her lover (all right, it won’t last long),—

“If you always show your affection, Peter, by shaking people by the throat, I trust you will not be very fond of me.”

Peter’s reply was——(The publishers have drawn their pen through the rest of this paragraph).

* * * * *

This is a fit and proper time to conclude Peter’s history. He is fairly launched on the life he desires, and in it may he prosper.

* * * * *

Telegram from the author to the publishers a month after writing the foregoing :—

“Stop printing ‘Peter Penniless.’ There is another incident to add.”

Telegram from the publishers to author :—

“Very inconvenient to stop press. Book long enough. Write to-night.”

The substance of the author’s letter in reply will be found in the next chapter.



CHAPTER LI.

Peter's wedding—An unexpected wedding guest—A pleasant surprise.

PETER Longley was a great friend of mine. Indeed I am the "doctor" alluded to in the course of the story.

When he was a keeper I liked him much. When he blossomed as a gentleman I naturally liked him more, and he was even more intimate with me than he was with his other great friend, Knox; so that when two years more had elapsed, I obtained his permission to write the story of his life as a keeper. The book was being pushed through the press, and the last chapter was in type, when I despatched the telegram quoted in the last chapter. I should not have done this had there not been something important to tell, affecting both Peter and Gerard. This day was Peter's wedding-day. At mid-day I sent the telegram. This afternoon I sit down to recount very shortly the proceedings of this morning. The purport of this chapter is not to describe the wedding. That passed off very well indeed. Peter Longley and his bride, Ethel, looked as charming a couple as could anywhere be found. She wore—well, the usual white things; and the bridesmaids were dressed in—it was something very nice, and they were pretty girls; the general colour was either blue or pink, but these details escaped my attention. What did attract my attention, however, was the presence, in the Wetacre Churchyard, of an old gentleman, a stranger to the district. He was very well dressed; but had

the unmistakable dried-up look of a person long resident in foreign countries. There were a great many persons gathered in the churchyard on this pleasant June morning, waiting for the arrival of the wedding party. As I spoke to one after another I noticed the old gentleman following me about, and at last I turned and looked at him. He took off his hat very politely, and said,

"Excuse me, sir, but I imagine you may be able to answer, some enquiries I am desirous of making. Is it true that a Mr. Peter Longley is about to be married here to-day?"

"It is true, sir," I answered.

"And is he the young gentleman who came here about six years ago in the guise of a gamekeeper?"

"He did; and as I happen to be a great friend of his, and he and his brother have been staying at my house, perhaps I may enquire the reason of your interest in him?"

"Gently, my dear sir. I want to get a sight of him first, and then I wish you to introduce me to Mrs. Spencer, who has, I understand, charge of the bride; then I desire to be present at the wedding breakfast, and then I will satisfy you that my curiosity is a legitimate one."

"But how can I introduce you to Mrs. Spencer, if I do not know your name," said I.

"Ah! that is true," replied the old gentleman, reflectively. "Well, on the understanding that you do not tell anyone else before the breakfast, I will admit that my name is Longley as well as the bridegroom's, and that I am a relative."

"Bless me!" I exclaimed; but the arrival of Peter and his best man, Gerard, interrupted further conversation. We went into the church, and the old gentleman secured a prominent seat. The bride and her party did not keep us long waiting, and the whole ceremony was so very interesting and charming, that it made me regret that I had so long remained a bachelor.

As the wedding party were leaving the church I detained

Mrs. Spencer, and introduced the old gentleman. He drew her aside, and they had a few minutes' eager conversation, after which he accompanied her into her carriage, and they drove off after the others, I and a crony preferring to walk the short distance across the park.

The breakfast party was a large one, and Mr. and Mrs. Quadling were there, looking happy, but uncomfortable. Peter claimed Quadling to be his oldest friend there, and after much previous persuasion, he had agreed to propose the bridegroom's health. When the rugged, sunburnt figure rose, and was silent for a moment or two, I felt hot with nervousness on his account; but his slight pause was, as he said afterwards, "to get his eye on to his game;" and he said a few sentences of homely heartfelt friendship and goodwill, which were in the best of taste, and inspired the gayest of those present with respect for the old fellow. Peter's speech in reply was short, frank, and manly; and I noticed that he then just noticed the presence of the old gentleman, and looked at him, evidently wondering who he could be.

When Peter sat down, the old gentleman arose, and a thrill of excitement ran through the company present, who instinctively felt that something unusual was about to happen. He began without any prelude, in a quavering voice,—

"Many years ago I had a brother, with whom I unfortunately quarrelled. At this distance of time I really hardly remember with distinctness what the quarrel was about. It was, however, a trifling matter, and would never have assumed the serious dimensions it did had it not been for my own obstinacy and self-will. Be that as it may, our intercourse was entirely broken off, and when, shortly afterwards, I went to India with a civil appointment there, I lost sight of my brother, and he of me, and from that time we have been utter strangers. My sole object in life was to make money, and in that I have succeeded, only to find that money will not bring happiness—will not

make up for lost health, and will not make the old heart young. So I bethought myself that I would rest content with my gains; come to England, and if my brother lived, endeavour to grasp his hand once more in friendship. When I arrived in England I found, alas! that while fortune had been kind to me she had been unkind to him. So unkind that the fair estates to which, as elder son, he had succeeded had gone from him; he had gone from this world, and his two boys, whom I remembered as little children, had gone into the world to gain a livelihood. It was not, however, difficult to trace them, and here at last I find them. If they will accept this public confession as an atonement of my estrangement from their late father, let them signify it."

In a moment Peter and Gerard were one on each side of him grasping his hands, and, in broken utterances, endeavouring to express their joy at having found a relation; while the ladies at the table cried so much that—Faith! I could not help weeping myself. A great tear rolled down my nose and dropped on to my plate.

Mr. Longley raised his hand to beg for silence, and continued, "My nephew Peter, I understand, took the name of Penniless in a half joke at his fate. If he has not too much of the pride which has already worked sufficient evil in the family, I will see that neither he nor his brother shall be penniless again. That shall be my atonement. My nephews seem fine young fellows, and if Peter's wife is as good as she is lovely, he is a lucky fellow. I see there are wedding presents in another room. I could not add mine before, but I beg to do so now. It is a present to my new-found niece, and is given to her on the express condition that she spends it without any assistance from her husband."

He passed a cheque for a thousand pounds to her, and sat down amidst a hearty cheer, and the men rose and drank his health with musical honours.

There never was such a wedding breakfast before, and I doubt whether there ever will be again.

Peter and his wife delayed going at the time which they had originally intended. They are now on the point of starting, and I throw down my pen to run and wish them good-bye and good luck.

THE END

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